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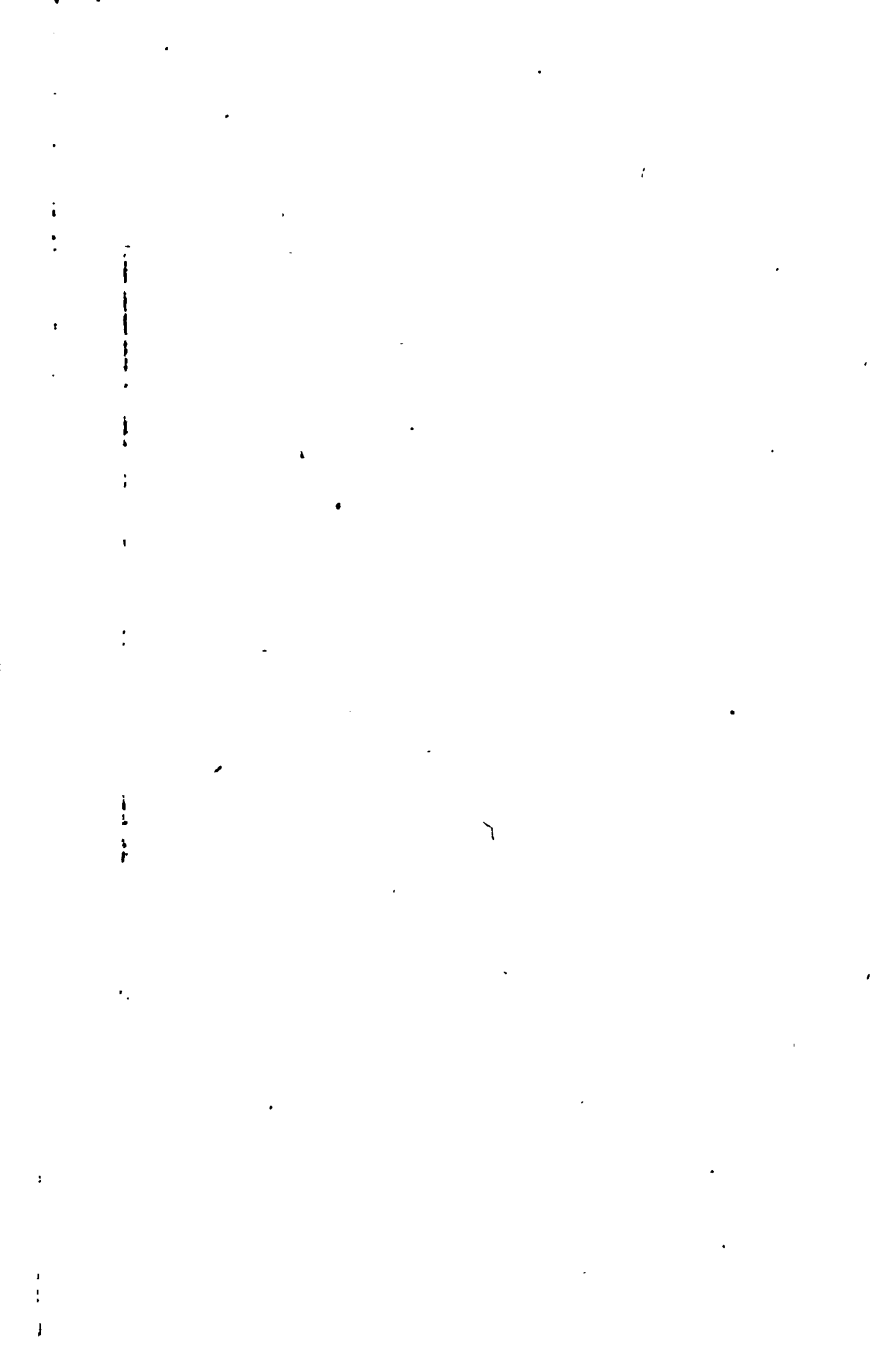
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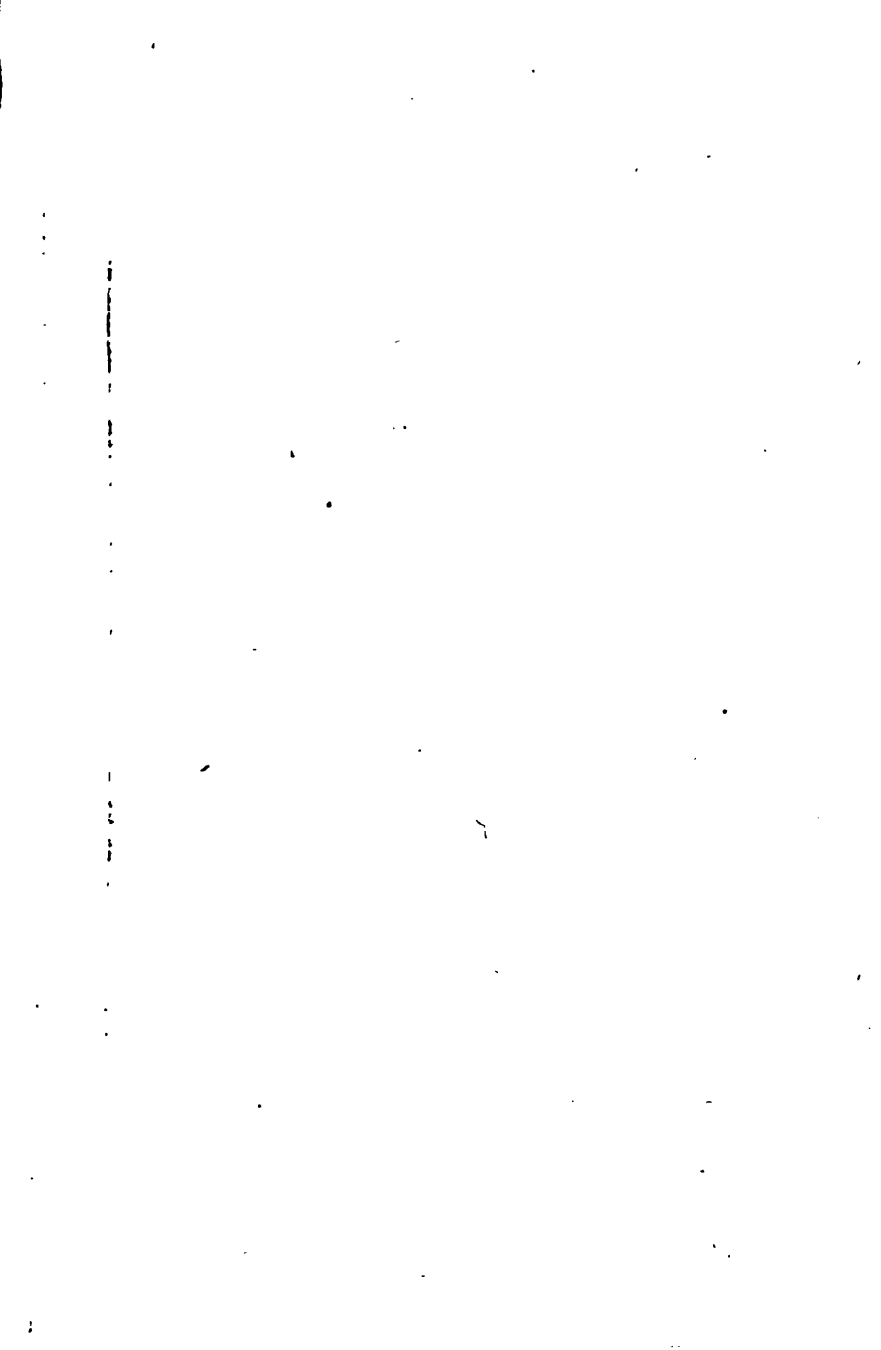


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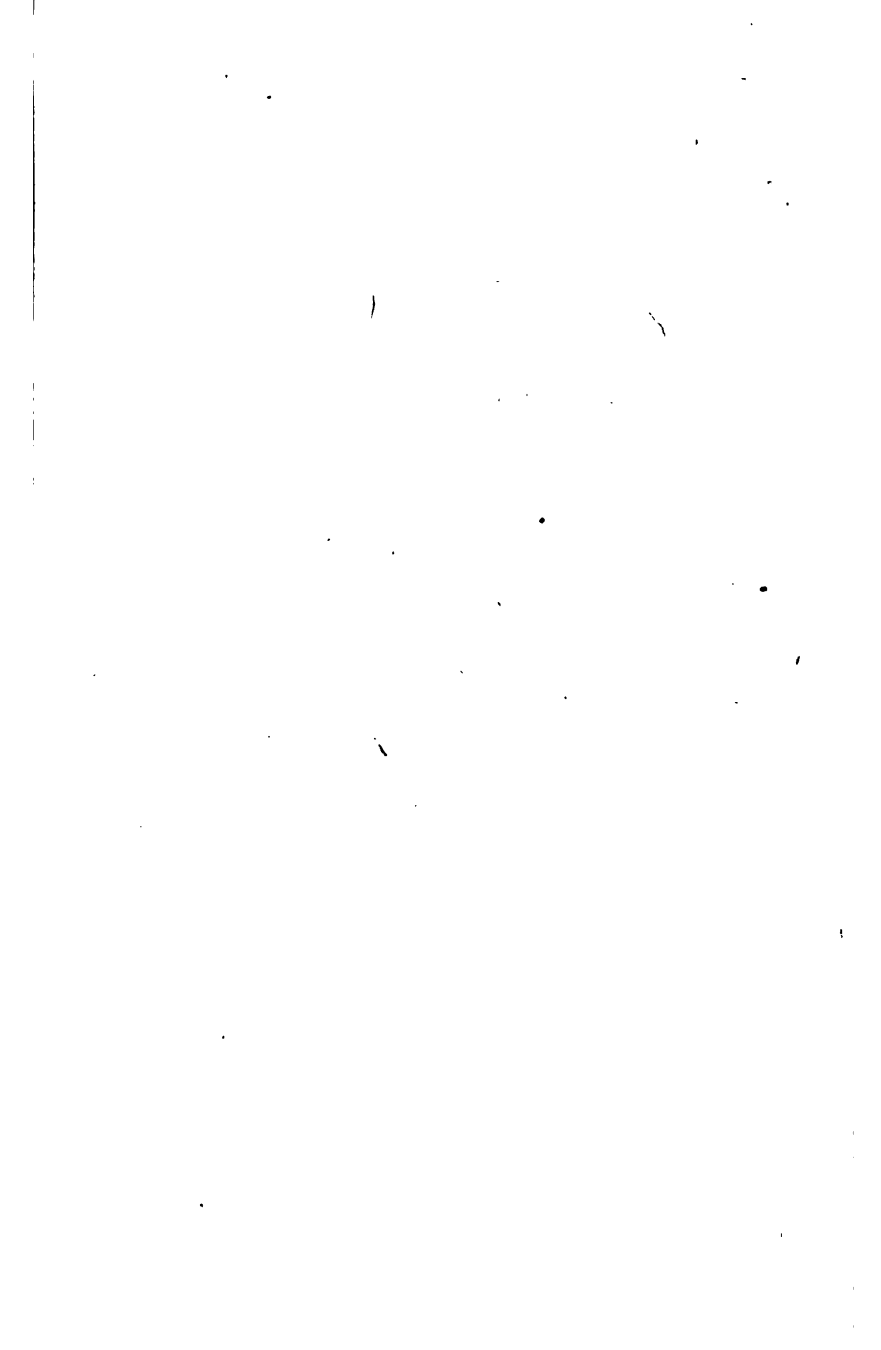












THE THREE OF HEARTS

NOVELS BY BERTA RUCK

HIS OFFICIAL FIANCÉE

THE WOOING OF ROSAMOND FAYRE

THE BOY WITH WINGS

IN ANOTHER GIRL'S SHOES

THE GIRLS AT HIS BILLET

MISS MILLION'S MAID

THE THREE OF HEARTS

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*"How many people do know?" Nora counted on her
little fingers (Page 267)*

THE THREE OF HEARTS

BY

BERTA RUCK

(**Mrs. OLIVER ONIONS**)

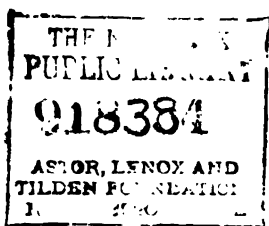
Author of "His Official Fiancée," "In Another Girl's Shoes,"
"The Girls at His Billet," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
EDWARD C. CASWELL



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**WITH LAUGHTER AND GOOD WISHES
TO
G. L. B.
(13TH AUSTRALIAN LIGHT HORSE)**

ILLUSTRATIONS

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| “Engaged——” Billy's eyes turned from the flushed and sparkling face of Nora to the dark face of Hunter | | 138 |
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THE THREE OF HEARTS



THE THREE OF HEARTS

CHAPTER I

PROPOSING! Making an offer of marriage to a girl! It is a great event in the life of almost any young man, however hardened. But have any of my young men-readers (that is if any young men do read my stories), have any of these young men ever proposed to three girls in one evening?

This was what Billy Somers did, on a certain eventful evening of his life.

More than that, he was accepted by all three of the girls! Here is the story of it.

It began in the far-off days before the war; those jolly old days which most of us are beginning to look back upon as if they belonged to some happy-go-lucky kind of previous existence, where there were comparatively no bothers in the world.

That world still held possibilities of making one's plans months ahead; it held long holidays, it

held pleasure-trips to the Continent and it held regimental-dances.

It was at a regimental-dance that this achievement of Mr. Billy Somers' took place.

Yes, the dance was given by his regiment, the Loamshire Light Infantry, at the depot which we will call Ditchwater. It was stuck in a valley amidst fields and flat fields, often flooded by the sluggish river Loam; and it would have been as dull as its name, if it hadn't been for the soldiers. They made things hum (as they generally do)!

There was no hall for dancing at the sleepy old depot, so the Loamshires covered what seemed like an acre of bare field with a floor of waxed boards, so beautifully put together that you couldn't see a join; a perfect floor, smooth as a mirror, and slung, too, so that you felt as if you were waltzing on air. They put up a gay, scarlet-and-white striped marquee, and they hung it with garlands and flags of every description; and they dangled big pink and primrose-coloured Japanese lanterns like giant fruit among the greenery, and they improvised "sitting-out" corners with rugs and deck-chairs and plenty of dusk to compensate for the draughts.

Who cares about draughts, though, when they are the age of Second Lieutenant Billy Somers and the One Girl in the World? The one girl

of Billy's world was called Nora Wynne-Pritchard, she was half-Welsh and half-Irish. She had a skin like a tea-rose, blue eyes put in with a smutty finger, and she was as proud, as spirited, as full of defiance as a little, young, unbroken thoroughbred. For weeks Billy had been screwing up his courage to propose to this little untamed beauty; planning opportunities (which didn't come off), practising openings (not one of which Nora ever heard). On his way to the Orderly Room the young subaltern would find himself muttering: "Don't you think, Miss Wynne-Pritchard, that we seem to have a good deal in common? We've always been pals. Couldn't we start being something rather better than just pals?"

As he swung into the Barrack Square he would be inwardly murmuring, "Have you sometimes wondered why I've been coming up to inflict myself upon you all so often lately?"

Or in the Mess when he sat down to play Bridge in the evening, his mind would be only half on the cards, the other half would be saying, "Look here, I hate having to mention money to you, Miss Nora; you know I'm practically a pauper, only a hundred and fifty a year besides my pay, but if you could look at me, there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do to try and get on——"

How cold-blooded, how commonplace and hackneyed it seemed! How poor Billy cursed himself

because he could not hit on some more original way of putting it!

Then he thought, "Well, dash it all, what does it matter how the thing's 'put'?" Great thing is to get it off your chest somehow." And again he would begin what he called "jockeying about for a start." It was extraordinary that a young sportsman who could ride so straight to hounds—a young soldier who had in him even then the potentialities of dash and daring that won for him, later on, his D.S.O.—it was amazing that he should suffer from hesitation and "cold feet" when it came to telling the One Girl in the World that he wanted her for his wife.

However, he is not alone in his eccentricity. There are plenty of young men like that. Ask their girls!

When it came to the night of the dance, though, a miracle happened. At one "go" all Billy's stage-fright vanished.

I can't tell you why this was. Whether it was because he'd been driven desperate by the consciousness of his own shilly-shallying, or whether it was because Nora looked so distractingly pretty in her rose-pink dance-dress, with her dark hair done in a new way, or whether it was because a man always does feel rather different with a perfectly swung floor instead of plain ground beneath his feet and with the thrilling throb of waltz-music in his ears! (The Loamshires certainly possessed "some" band.)

Perhaps Billy plucked up heart of grace from the consciousness of the faultless fit of his dress-trousers and of the scarlet mess-jacket that he certainly filled to perfection. . . . You think nonsense? You think it's only a *feminine* trait to gain courage from what you happen to be wearing? But haven't you noticed that the very nicest, manliest male masculine men have generally got some tiny feminine weakness of this sort, inherited straight from their tender mothers? However, to get on with this dance in the marquee crowded with every coloured frock, black and red and white Mess-kit. Ah! say what you like about our more glorious khaki, it hasn't got the charm of the dear departed scarlet! It doesn't so set off the bright heads of the wearers!

"It takes a very fair man to look well in that red," pronounced one of the girls, Lorne Halliday, the Dean's daughter, as Billy came up the room; Billy's varnished hair was blond as a primrose.

"Oh, I don't think so," said her friend, Nora Wynne-Pritchard; "uniform only suits a man who's very dark, with a head like a boot-button, like the M.O. here."

Here Billy Somers strolled straight up to her. The tone in which he demanded her programme was more masterful than any that the young woman had ever heard from him.

Masterfulness doesn't go down with all women

(though all men think it does). It did with Nora. She was surprised. She was suddenly shy. For the first time she found that she could not look the Somers boy squarely in the eyes. She lifted her own pretty eyes no higher than the young clean-cut and obstinate-looking chin as she handed to him her programme, tied with a ribbon of the Loamshire's colours. Billy scrawled a large "B" beside more dances than I should like to count, for fear of setting a bad example! Then, still feeling completely and incredibly master of the situation, he booked up two dances or so with other girls. Another couple of strictly duty-dances, to sit out with mammas or aunts of the Regiment, and Billy was ready for the fray.

At his fifth dance with Nora, "IT" came off.

They went, the long-legged, slim-waisted soldier in uniform, and the small pretty girl in pink, down a red-carpeted corridor and into the nook that was divided off from the rest of the dancing-place by the kind of swinging curtain of glass beads that you find in some London tea-shops.

Almost before he had sat down and stretched those long black and scarlet-striped legs of his over the rug before them, Billy found that he was happily "off," and in the middle of the great question, taking all his fences, so to speak, in his stride.

"Look here, Nora, I came here on purpose to tell you something to-night. I have been mad keen

on you ever since I came to this place, and I daresay it is frightful neck my saying so, but I believe you care a little bit for me, too. Don't you?"

The "neck" of this was evidently such as to strike Miss Nora quite speechless. At all events she gasped a little; coloured up pinker than her frock, and couldn't answer for some seconds. Then she said, "You take a great deal for granted."

"Yes, I know it's a lot," said Billy Somers, in his boyish way; "but look here, darling, I do love you."

Nora, pulling herself together, her teasing, proud little self, said: "Well, I don't know that that is any reason why I should immediately become devoted to you, is it? Lots of people—I mean, several men—have told me they were in love with me, before this."

"Have they, by Gad?" said Billy Somers, grimly. "Let me catch any of 'em at it again, that is all!"

This was again the masterful tone that proved too much for Nora. Before she had come to this dance, she had received the sure tip by woman's wireless, that Billy Somers' proposal was to come off that night, and she had also made up her mind just how she was going to take it. Eventually, of course, she would say "yes," because Billy was the dearest thing in the world, and she knew she could never bear to see any other girl snap him up.

But before that "yes," she meant to lead him no end of a dance. She would tease him and torment him and flirt with him first! Oh, rather. For at least a week she intended to "keep him guessing" as our Neutral cousins say. She'd rehearsed it to herself: "*Really, this is very unexpected. No, Mr. Somers, I don't think I want to be engaged to anybody for years yet! I'm too fond of having a good time. What makes you imagine you care for me? I simply have never thought about you in that light,*" and so on.

But just as Billy had lost his "funk" for the occasion, so Nora for the moment lost all her mischievous self-possession. Away went her plans for letting her lover dangle in suspense, for saying neither "no" nor "yes." All she could say, and pretty breathlessly, too, was, "Oh, Billy, I didn't know you really meant it."

"I've meant nothing else since the first moment I set eyes on you at that tennis-tournament," said Billy, firmly. "Now, I want to know what you mean. Do you like me well enough to marry me? Yes or no?"

Making a last effort to behave as she had always planned, Nora opened her lips to say, "I don't know yet," but the only thing that came out of them was a shy, but unmistakable, "Yes."

Before it was fairly uttered, the enraptured Billy seemed to smother the word in a kiss as long as six.

He caught the girl in his arms; she seemed to have belonged there always, already! Then he loosed her for a second as he demanded: "Say it again! Say it again!"

And then, at this golden moment, interruption strolled up in the person of a man whom Billy had always considered his best friend. His worst enemy wouldn't have been received with a more deadly scowl than that which young Somers fixed upon the good-natured face of Captain Hallett, of their Mess.

"Our dance, Miss Wynne-Pritchard," said the intruder, utterly oblivious of his crime.

Nora, with a touch to her hair, took her next partner's arm and went off with him as promptly as possible so as not to show that anything had happened.

Billy, torn between fury and ecstasy, betook himself to the cardroom. There were three more dances before he had another with the One Girl in the World; and this next dance was free for him. He intended to have a cigarette and a drink to steady his nerve. In the cardroom he found two senior officers and a couple of their guests solemnly scowling over a green table. Before the bar at the end of the place stood a fellow for whom Billy did not particularly care. Hunter, his name was, the medical officer.

Now, an M.O. may be any sort of a person. Sometimes, as we know, he is a most charming crea-

ture. Sometimes—well! This man Hunter, for instance, can only be described as a very odd fish. This story will show his oddness; also his fishiness. For reasons which we'll go into later, the dark, rather too handsome and Mephistophelian Hunter had got a "down" on the happy-go-lucky, popular Somers. But it was with much cordiality that he hailed him now.

"Hullo, William!"

"Hullo," said Billy Somers, glancing round to see if there were anybody else to talk to. There wasn't. He couldn't very well stroll out again.

He could only take the M.O.'s proffered cigarette, nod when the other man said: "What's yours? Champagne?" and mutter "Cheer O" over the bubbling drink that the wooden-faced Mess Orderly handed over to him.

Little did Billy Somers suspect the lightning-swift manœuvre of the doctor-man that had substituted one glass for another during the moment that his, Billy's, fair head had turned towards the card table, recognising the father of his Nora. The Mess Orderly's back was turned, also. No one saw that into Billy's glass of bubbly there had been dropped a mere pinch of white powder; a powder that turned the apparently harmless drink into a brew that might have come out of the witch's cauldron to cause "*double double toil and trouble!*" For some time now the vindictive person who was M.O. to the

Loamshires had been planning how he could discredit this very well-liked subaltern in the eyes of the Powers-that-Be.

The Colonel was very strong—not to say a rabid crank!—on Temperance. Now, if it could only be brought to his notice that young Somers (such a favourite of his!) had exceeded the limit——

But Hunter had known this was a hopeless idea. The boy was not only temperate in his habits, but he also possessed the type of head (*"Head, cast-iron, crystal-clear, young officers, a godsend to,"* as it might go down in requisitions) which would have seen him unmoved through any orgy. Therefore, the Medical Officer knew that it would have been perfectly useless to attempt to lure the boy away and fill him up with more cocktails than he could carry. So he, Hunter, had come to his unprincipled conclusion. There was nothing to be done but to "dope" his one drink with something that would make it more deadly than a babbling brook full of unadulterated strong drink.

This he did.

To cut the story short, the effect of this potent dope on poor Billy Somers was as deadly as the heart of his enemy could have desired—but in a different way. He did not become conspicuous, boisterous, and rowdy, which was the effect hoped for by Hunter. But he did become—not himself, forgetful of everything that had happened that evening already. He

went out of that cardroom a man who moved in a dream; a dream which was to grow into one of the worst nightmares he had ever known.

The one and only clear idea in his suddenly muddled young mind was that he had come to the Loamshires' dance with the purpose of proposing to somebody, and that he must do so or perish before he got back to barracks.

It was unfortunate that the first person who confronted him, as he wandered out of the cardroom with this fixed idea in his mind, should happen to be Miss Lorne Halliday.

Lorne Halliday, the Dean's daughter, was a thorough contrast to the One Girl in the World, inasmuch as she was what is called a "soulful" young lady. She was intellectual, she was bookish, she was artistic; but she wasn't a bad-looking girl in her dark-eyed, gentle, wistful style. It was a pity she'd got the reputation for being "clever," because if there is anything in this wide world that puts young men off, it is the idea that some unfortunate girl may be "brainy." That settles it even if they have begun to like her; if they haven't begun, they don't start. This had been the case with poor Lorne, who was then in her second year at College. Nobody thought she cared for anything but reading earnest books without any pictures on the cover, and going to solemn plays all about Socialism.

Which was a big mistake.

The poor girl would have given all Girton for a box of chocolates and a little frivolous conversation from a young man buzzing about her! And she didn't yearn for the long-haired undergraduate stamp of young man, either; no, the so-called "brainless" Army type would have been quite good enough for her. Always she'd cherished an unacknowledged admiration for the merry, boyish face of Billy Somers. She flushed quite prettily as he claimed her for the next dance. How could she know that this young man's head was spinning round more quickly than any of the waltzing couples on that perfect floor where they danced? Twice they made the tour of the room. Billy didn't know how! And then he found himself suggesting to his partner that they might take a little outside the marquee?

Never before had Lorne been asked by any young man to take a turn anywhere.

Fluttered and delighted, she slipped off to the cloakroom for a wrap to put about her shoulders. Then she followed Billy, who nearly tripped over the guy-ropes, outside into the purple velvety gloom of the June night. There was a scatter of stars above, below was the soft dewy grass; here and there one saw the red point of a cigarette in the darkness, the pale, flower-like glimmer of a girl's frock . . . one heard an indistinct murmur, a short laugh. . . .

"It must be a dream, all this," Billy told him-

self as the two moved slowly down the path past the caterer's cart. "The people in dreams are always muzzy-looking, like this!"

And then he——

Well, to this day Billy Somers cannot remember how the awful thing started, or what he was thinking of. He could not have imagined it was Nora he was with. No! He knew who it was.

Yet the idea took hold of him that here was the girl to whom he had meant to propose.

He found himself in the middle of doing it, and in the words, too, of one of his many "rehearsals" for Nora.

"I say, we've always got on well together, haven't we? Couldn't we begin to be something rather better than chums?" Lorne Halliday stared at him. He wound up, "How about our getting engaged?"

Lorne Halliday gasped.

"But, Mr. Somers," she protested in an uncertain little voice, "you cannot be serious. Surely you cannot care—for *me*?"

Somewhere at the back of Billy's brain he realised that this slim girl at his side had hit on the truth. It was surely not to her that he, Billy, had planned to say the words that he had just uttered. Then the deadly "dope" that had poisoned his one glass of champagne clouded his mind again. Through the mists that drifted about him, under the stars that seemed to whirl and wheel above him, he heard him-

self declaring, fervently, "I am serious!" Here he grabbed hold of something; ah, the fence! "I do care for you. I want to know if there's a chance of your caring for me, Miss Halliday?"

Lorne Halliday, the light of her College, who always kept her head in examinations, seemed to lose it, entirely, here. For here was the one question she'd thought she would never be asked to answer as long as she lived! Here was a proposal of marriage! And from this dear boy! She had hardly time to know what she thought about it all herself before she found herself blurting out: "Care for you? Of course I will if you like, Billy; but I never dreamt—I am not pretty or anything!" she faltered, pathetically.

It must have seemed to the bemused Billy at that moment that the Irish eyes and the creamy dimpled shoulders of his Nora were before him again. For he replied, warmly: "Not pretty? You're lovely, I think. You're the rippingest-looking girl I've ever seen in my life."

He let go the fence; he slipped his arm about her under the silken wrap; he put his other hand under her chin and kissed her. (The first kiss poor Lorne had ever had except from middle-aged relations or other girls!) Then, still with his arm about her waist, the young soldier, who was not responsible for his actions, took the girl, who felt the skies had fallen, back to the marquee.

Almost at the door Lorne Halliday was claimed for the next dance by a curate.

Billy, with his head whirling more giddily than ever, clutched his programme and thought: "Frightfully rum dream, this one I'm in! I shall wake up presently to find my servant bringing in an early cup of tea. But I know what's got to happen first. *I have got to propose to some girl.* Now, who is it?"

"Oh, Mr. Somers," said a girlish voice at his side, "you were going to cut our dance, you know you were!"

"Oh, rather not," protested Billy at large. He glanced wildly at his programme; the name on it was Goosey—of course, he'd got this with Lily Goosey.

It was not a nickname! It was the girl's authentic name. The Gooseys were a prosperous family who lived in a big, *nouveau-riche*, grey-stone house three miles further up the Loam Valley. Papa Goosey was a contractor. Mamma Goosey was fat, fair, and forty. Lily, the only girl, was eighteen, fair, and so pretty that you could hardly believe it was real—though it was a very different beauty from that of Nora.

Think of the most highly coloured picture post cards you have seen; think of the daintiest supplements to *The Sketch*, think of the exquisite creations on the lids of chocolate-boxes—well, there you have Miss Goosey, and her name fitted her as well as her five-and-three-quarter gloves,

The girl was without an idea in her fluffy, yellow head. Foolish and frivolous beyond words, yet nobody could feel angry with her, any more than they could scold a giggling, gurgling baby. Lily was always giggling and crying, "Oh, Mr. So-and-so!" and opening her enormous china-blue eyes at young men.

"Cut your dance?" said the dope-dazed Billy to this vision. "Why, I only came here to dance with you!"

"Oh, Mr. Somers, you are silly!" gurgled Lily. She put her tiny hand on his arm, and he whisked her off, feeling as if he were one-stepping with a piece of thistledown. Her frock was light and silvery, to add to the effect; her minute shoes were silver, her curls were golden.

Silver and gold—gold and silver—of what was it that this reminded Billy?

Unfortunately, of one of his "rehearsed" proposals. Promptly, and for the third time that evening, the wretched boy plunged into an offer of marriage. "It's the gold and silver that's the trouble. I hate to mention money to you," he muttered, wildly, as they danced. "You know I've only a hundred and fifty besides my pay, but look here! if you would only marry me——"

"Oh, Mr. Somers, what are you talking about!" cried Lily. "Who do you want to marry who?"

"You and me," said poor Billy, earnestly, while

her hair blew against his sunburnt cheek. "Look here! I say, how—how rippingly well our steps go together, don't they?" Here he only just avoided grinding her tiny, silver-shod toes into the glossy floor as they gyrated. "Supposing we were partners for life? I am serious!" Here he vaguely wondered if he hadn't said that before.

"And I do care for you!" he wound up. "I think you're so—so wonderful!"

"Oh, Mr. Somers! You know you think I'm a perfect little idiot," protested Lily, without a spark of malice. She had the golden good-nature with which the entirely foolish often disarm criticism. "You know quite well you think there's absolutely nothing in me!"

"I don't! I mean I do!" Billy assured her in the mazes of the dance. He was one-stepping, avoiding collisions with the circling throng, and gabbling away to his partner, all perfectly mechanically. "I say! I've always considered you the Silly of the Ballet! I mean—I mean the Lily of the Valley! Couldn't you like me a little bit? Enough to marry me?"

"Oh, goodness," gurgled Lily. "Fancy!"

Her feather-head began to whirl almost as giddily as Billy's had done ever since he had taken that draught of trouble mixed for him by a vindictive doctor-man.

Mr. Somers, proposing to her! Mr. Somers!

She'd never noticed that he liked her at all! But he was so good-looking, and so popular! All the officers said that! Everybody in the Mess liked him. Lots of the girls would be glad to marry him. She, Lily herself, had been glad to draw him as a partner in the tennis-tournament. And now— Partners for life, he said?

It would be rather jolly, Lily thought. Yes, it would be rather fun to get engaged now; younger than any of her girl-friends! And to such a nice boy!

So the baby-blue eyes smiled coquettishly up at him as Lily gurgled: "Oh, well, Mr. Somers, if my people don't mind my getting engaged to you, I'll see how I like it, perhaps. Will that do?"

"You little ripper!" murmured Billy, gazing down into the preposterously pretty flapper-face that he only saw as a pink blur. This dream of his, he thought, was getting "curiouser and curiouser" as Alice said in Wonderland. Had he proposed as he'd meant to do, or what had happened?

Presently this last girl with whom he had been dancing was swept away from him, by somebody or other, and the music had stopped.

A moment or so later he found himself again in the cardroom, feeling a trifle less giddy, but still as if something was wrong. Some of the fellows were laughing at some story of the M.O.'s. Billy walked up to the buffet.

"Champagne, sir?" said the Mess Orderly.

"No. Black coffee," ordered Billy Somers, still out of that curious dream.

But the awakening was not far off.

CHAPTER II

ON the morning after that eventful dance, Lieutenant Billy Somers, looking outwardly as if nothing much had ever happened to him, was taking a squad drill in the Barrack Square.

The Square was flanked on his right hand by the big red-brick barracks of Ditchwater. On his left hand, by the railings and hedge that separated it from the narrow bit of road which was known as "Love Lane," chiefly because all the pretty maid-servants in Ditchwater found it necessary to pass by for their shopping of a morning—to say nothing of their non-shopping of an evening.

It was bright and sunny; the shadows of the men at drill were small, black-moving pools on the scorched gravel at their feet as they "right-turned" and "about-turned" and "halted," "quick-marched" and "as-they-wered"; for it was these simple evolutions only that the young subaltern seemed to be capable of giving them on that particular June morning.

The Corporal wondered. One would have thought that this was the first drill either Mr. Somers or the men had ever taken. And for once in his life this keen, young officer was barking out an order as

mechanically as if his mind were fixed on something utterly different, which it was. Billy's mind was at that moment soaring worlds away from the glaring drill-ground and the red-coated, black-trousered soldiers. He was thinking of last night.

No wonder, you will think! The night that he had proposed to a string of three girls, one after the other!

Ah! but wait! Perhaps you will be surprised to hear that it was not the *three* girls he was thinking of. The time had not yet come for Billy Somers to realise what he had done under the influence of a white powder dropped by a malicious hand into a golden, bubbly drink. Billy had woken up when his servant called him that morning at seven to a feeling of a slight headache, and the sense that he had been dreaming like Billy-O from the moment that he put his head on the pillow. Dreaming, by Jove, that he had made an ass of himself by proposing to every girl he knew in the place! Then, more thoroughly awake, the boy remembered with a delighted little jump of heart that, no, it was not all a dream. One part of it was true enough, and was the best thing (rather!) that had ever happened to him. *He had proposed to the One and Only Girl in the World*; and Nora had said she would have him. She had given him his answer in a "yes" that he had promptly smothered in a kiss that he would never, never forget.

Forgotten entirely were those two other proposals that had happened when his poor doped brain hardly knew what his tongue was saying. All thought of Miss Lorne Halliday had melted away from his consciousness like the dews of the night before. As for "the Lily of the Valley," she might never have bloomed into being as far as this young subaltern was concerned. What he saw, wherever he turned his eyes, was the face of the One Girl with its mischievous blue, black-fringed eyes and the proud, petal-soft lips that he had kissed at last. What he dreamt of was his next meeting with *her*!

He had the afternoon off. He would be able to dash up to her house the second after he had swallowed his lunch and got out of uniform. The Wynne-Pritchard's, standing half a mile out of the town, was an old-fashioned, rambling place with pink rambler roses making a broad girdle about the white waist of it. There was the tennis-lawn in front of it, and a jolly garden at the back, where Billy had spent more than one afternoon already with the lady of his heart picking gooseberries and so on. Beating about the bush, in fact, in more senses than one!

However, there'd be no more of that, the young man told himself, gleefully, as he pushed open the white gate and sped up the path as if on the wings of Love. He was engaged . . . wonderful thought! . . . in a moment he would see **HER**!

He thought he heard another step behind the

bushes. For a second he fancied that he caught a glimpse of a mauve linen tennis-skirt that he knew.

He stopped.

"Nora!" he called, softly. But there was no reply.

He went up to the porch under the swinging baskets of ivy-leaved geraniums and rang the bell.

In the tone of a man who meant to get what he had come for, he asked to see Miss Nora.

The house-parlourmaid, who had been with the Wynne-Pritchards ever since Nora was a child, gave him the friendly smile with which most maids in the houses where Billy called were accustomed to greet the popular young subaltern. Then, looking graver, said she was sorry, but Miss Nora was not at home.

"Not at home?" cried Billy, very much taken by surprise. "Not at home! Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, sir, quite sure," said the maid. "She told me just now to say that she was not at home to any visitors."

"Visitors!" repeated Billy, blankly, and then his face cleared as he thought, "Oh, of course the little girl said that, so that she need not see anybody but me." And he added: "You might tell her I'm here, Mary, will you, please?"

"Yes, sir," said Mary, speaking rather doubtfully. As she well might do, considering Miss Nora had dashed past her only two minutes ago in the

hall with the whispered command, "Mary, there's Mr. Somers coming in now at the gate, but if he asks for me, you are to say I am not in; I am not going to see him."

So, wondering privately what all this might be about, the excellent maid showed Billy into the pretty, shady drawing room where Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard was sitting writing letters. The still young and pretty little lady looked up at him when he came in, with eyes that were so like his Nora's that, in his softened and enthusiastic mood, Billy nearly kissed her on the spot.

Then Major Wynne-Pritchard, a spare, brown-faced man, with "Retired Indian Army" written all over him, strolled in from the kitchen-garden (which was his hobby) and shook hands very kindly with the young man, for whom he had always had rather a fancy. Billy, full to the eyes of emotion and tender feelings towards the girl of his heart, felt some of this overflowing towards her people.

With any luck they would be *his* people now, and how jolly fortunate he'd be to possess such nice "in-laws"!

Mothers-in-law were a comic-paper joke. There were no end of these idiotic yarns about tiresome old ladies who came and stayed in the house for donkey's-years, making mischief between husband and wife. It was absurd to think of these things in the same breath with Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard, who must have

been almost as lovely as his Nora when she was a girl.

And her father, too, the old Major. What a decent sort he was! Billy felt a thrill of the warmest gratitude towards these two people for having got married and produced the charming daughter who was to be his, Billy's, wife.

How he wished she would come down! Already it seemed an age since he had set eyes on her, and yet it was only last night, or rather, early this morning that he had said good-bye to her at the door at the marquee. The old Major always insisted on starting home before anybody else, so Billy had had only just time to whisper to Nora, "So long, darling! I will be up to speak to your Governor and all that to-morrow, the first instant that I can get away."

And now a thought struck Billy as he sat there on a chintz-covered armchair, answering Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard's polite remarks about the delightful dance last night. ("Delightful" was scarcely how the dance promised to turn out for Billy.) Well, as he sat there making up remarks about the weather and so on ("poodle-faking" it is called in the Army), the idea came to him that perhaps Nora had a reason for being so long in coming down. Perhaps she intended Billy to get over what used to be looked upon as "*the awful ordeal of asking papa*" before she, the prize that he asked for, allowed herself to appear.

If that were it, there was nothing to be done but to take the bull by the horns and to begin at once. So Billy, turning very red under his tan and freckles, cleared his throat as portentously as if it were before giving an order on a Field Day. Then went on, in a voice of great mildness, to say that he hoped the Major and Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard were not going to be put out by what he had got to say to them; but that he had thought he'd better own up at once, and tell them why it was he had been inflicting himself upon them rather often lately, the fact of the whole matter was——

Having got so far, very swimmingly, the young man faltered and broke off. He thought he had heard Nora's step in the hall . . . was it? No, it was a false alarm.

But before he had picked up his tale again, Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard burst in quite delightedly.

"Eric!" she cried, with a hand on her husband's arm, "what have I always told you? He did come here to see our Nora after all!"

Nora's lover almost laughed with satisfied relief.

"Yes, I did come to see Nora," he owned up, boyishly. "The fact is I am very desperately in love with her; and I hope very much, sir"—turning to the Major—"that you won't mind very much if I—in point of fact—if I marry her?"

Here the Major gave a queer little twisty smile under his short, grey moustache.

"I suppose you mean it wouldn't make very much difference to you," he took up, gruffly, "if I were to say I did 'mind'? Supposing I said I had every objection to your marrying my girl?"

Billy's young face turned blank. So Nora's father disapproved of him?

"It would make a difference, sir, I assure you. I——"

"You'd be prepared to give Nora up, eh?"

"No!" said the young man, respectfully but firmly. "If you'll let me say so, nothing in the world would induce me to do that, short of Nora herself saying she didn't want me."

"And she hasn't exactly said that?" asked the Major, drily.

"No," said Billy again, looking Nora's father steadily in the eyes. "I don't deserve it, one atom, but I'm proud to say she—she's been good enough to rather like me. Of course I—I'd a thousand times rather be able to think that I was taking her away from you with your approval, sir, and your good wishes, and all that—still, if that's a thing too good to hope for——"

The quick voice of Nora's mother broke in with its faint, delicious trace of brogue. "Ah, Mr. Somers! My husband's only teasing you! I assure you it's simply delighted he is to think it's you we're going to welcome as a son-in-law. Some one we've always known all about, and been fond of, and a

soldier, too! Won't it be the greatest relief to us to think of that wicked little Nora, the little tease and flirt that she is, settling down happily with some one that we thoroughly approve of?"

"Oh, I say, Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard! Can you really mean that?" stammered Billy, quite overcome with relief. "Does—" He turned nervously to the Major again.

The Major had dropped his assumed frown, and was now beaming all over his sun-dried face at Billy. Warmly he shook the young man by the hand; as warmly he declared that what Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard had said was all literally true. Since Nora had got to make up her mind whom she really wanted for a husband of her own, he was thankful that the young ruffian she'd chosen should prove to be so decent a youngster!

This touched Billy so profoundly that he could only turn red again, and murmur something absolutely indistinct after the manner of Englishmen in the throes of genuine emotion. It was almost too much! The One Girl in the World had said "yes," and her father and mother had professed themselves delighted!

Only why didn't the girl come down?

"Where is Miss Nora, Mary?" asked Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard when tea was brought in.

The house-parlourmaid, setting the big silver tray down before her mistress, said sedately that Miss

Nora had a bad headache and asked everybody to please excuse her.

"I have taken her up a nice cup of strong tea from the kitchen, ma'am," was Mary's conclusion.

Billy's face lengthened woefully at the idea that the meeting with his One Girl was to be postponed for another day after all.

"I expect the dance was too much for her," he said, sympathetically, to his mother-in-law elect. "Some people get awful bad headaches with waltzing."

"Nora did not complain of a headache this morning," said her mother, in mild surprise. "She was in great spirits, and then her friend, Lorne Halliday, the Dean's daughter, came over, to return an umbrella the Dean borrowed some time back, and they were talking in the garden together before lunch. Nora never said anything about a headache then."

"It must have come on since," said Billy, without great originality. "Can she take aspirin, or do you think the tea alone will be quite enough?" he went on, anxiously, still without a suspicion of what the real reason was that Nora denied him the light of her countenance.

"If you say that young Somers is going, that may fetch her down in a hurry," suggested Nora's father towards the end of tea, but Nora's mother shook her pretty grey head.

"She may feel she is looking heavy-eyed or pale

or something after the dance; and naturally the child would only wish to be seen at her very brightest just now," she said, archly. "Mr. Somers will understand that and forgive her?"

"Oh, forgive!" said Billy, ardently; "there is nothing she could do that I should not be ready to forgive!"

When he took his leave, Nora's mother called him "Billy" and said that already he was one of the family . . . of HER family!

He walked back to barracks with his head, as the saying is, "in a rainbow."

"What on earth's the matter with you?" demanded his great friend the Adjutant, Captain Hallett, as the young man nearly ran him down without seeing him. "Have you come in for the title and all the estates?"

"Better than that, old thing! Stacks better than that," returned Billy, joyously grabbing him by the arm. "I say, you have got to congratulate me!"

"Congratulate?" echoed the other man as they strolled into the deserted anteroom together. "When congratulations are asked for in that tone of voice by a fellow of your age, they can only mean one thing. Are we to have another married member in this Mess?"

"I hope so," said Billy Somers in a voice that was joyous and steady at the same time. "I'm the happiest fellow in the world, and the luckiest."

"Good," said his friend, affectionately, bringing down his hand on the boy's shoulder. "May one ask——"

"Oh, well! it can't be at once, of course," took up Billy, ruefully. "But I'm hoping that some day——"

"We'll drink to the Day, then, like the Germans," said Captain Hallet, cheerily.

Over his glass Billy said, "I suppose it's impossible to get such a thing as a decent engagement ring in this hole of a place. What does one do? Wire to town, I suppose." He got up and strolled, restlessly, to a writing-table. "I'll send off a wire now to old Glitters; he knows all my people; he'll send down two or three on approval, don't you think so? I don't know what she'd like. She ought to choose for herself, oughtn't she? You ought to be able to tell me, Hallett; you've got a Missis of your own!"

Captain Hallett's eyes were twinkling as he watched the impatient excitement of the newly accepted one (little suspecting that he was accepted *three-deep!*). The twinkle grew as he suggested, "You haven't favoured me with the lady's name yet." (The Adjutant and his wife, by the way, had been discussing the Billy-Nora affair for some weeks now.)

"You rotter, need you ask?" ejaculated young Somers, in mock wrath, writing out his wire to the

London jeweller. "As if it could be anybody but——"

Here he was interrupted by a Mess-waiter bringing up a note on a tray. "For Mr. Somers; a little boy just brought it up to barracks, sir."

Billy took the note joyously. Sweet of Nora, to send him a line for good-night! For, of course, he had come to the same conclusion as the Adjutant.

"Love-letters already, eh?" smiled Captain Hallett as he turned away. "Well, I'll get that wire for the rings sent for you, my young friend, and leave you to it."

Billy, left alone, opened his note.

"Billy read. . . .

Disappointment, bewilderment, amazement chased each other over Billy's comely, boy's-face. Scarcely the expressions you would expect to see on the countenance of a newly accepted lover reading his very first love-letter from the One Girl in the World!

But you see, this letter did not happen to come from Billy's "One Girl": namely Nora.

It was from one of the others!

CHAPTER III

THE letter was written on highly scented, Saxe-blue note paper, and was decorated by a design of white lilies-of-the-valley. The handwriting was pretty and rounded as that of a schoolgirl of fifteen. And the letter said:

“THE RETREAT,

“NEAR DITCHWATER,

“Thursday.

“MY DEAR BILLY:—

“It seems so funny to be calling you this! Well, I am just writing to tell you I told Mum and Dad about last night, and they say will you come up here to dinner to-night at a quarter to eight when we shall be very glad to see you. There will be nobody here, only ourselves. We can talk about everything then.

“Yours ever,

“LIL.”

Puzzled beyond words, Billy Somers sat back in the anteroom chair and gazed at this incomprehensible epistle.

From The Retreat? Yes; that was the big new grey-stone house about two miles out of Ditchwater where those rolling-in-riches contractor-people lived:

the Gooseys. And "Lil"? That was the eldest daughter; Lily Goosey, the pretty, giggling, goo-goo-eyed flapper! What in the name of everything odd was she writing to him, Billy Somers, about? ("Yours ever," too!) He knew her, of course, to talk to and to forage for ices at the local garden parties. He'd played with her at the tennis-club. But—he'd never been on Christian name terms with the silly little thing. What on earth did she mean by writing to him as "Billy," and by this reference to "last night"? Last night, of course, had been the night of his life: the gorgeous supper-dance when he'd got engaged to Nora. What else had happened? Not a gleam of the terrible truth had begun to dawn yet upon Billy. He only sat there wondering.

This girl, Lily Goosey, with whom he really didn't remember having exchanged more than a dozen words at a time, wrote to him as if they were on the most "chummy" terms, and called him "Billy"! What on earth could the girl mean by it? Could it be that the note was not meant for him? He picked up the envelope that had fallen to the rug. His name was on that right enough: "W. Somers, Esq., L.L.L., Ditchwater Barracks." Could that be a mistake? People sometimes had put a letter written to A into an envelope addressed to B; and a nice mess they could be involved in by the proceeding; it could not bear thinking of. Supposing that little Miss Goosey (who looked silly enough for anything) had written a

letter to another "Billy" (it was a common enough name!) and had posted it in an envelope which had been meant to contain an ordinary tea-fight invitation to Mr. Somers?

"By Jove, that must be it," thought Billy, "but I can make sure of that."

He sprang up and strode to the telephone at the other end of the anteroom, looking up in the book the number of *The Retreat*.

"Three, double-o, o, please. . . . Yes . . . I want to speak to Miss Goosey, please. *Miss Goosey*. Right, I'll hold on."

He waited a moment; all the time blissfully ignorant of all that had passed, last night, between him and this girl whom he had just rung up: utterly oblivious of his proposal to the pretty, frivolous creature, of his saying "our steps go so jolly well together: couldn't we be partners for life?" Not a memory remained with him of how the golden-haired Lily had returned, coyly, "If my people don't mind my being engaged to you, Mr. Somers, I'll see how I like it!" No; the effect of that drug of the M.O.'s had left him as completely as it had "landed" him.

In his ear a gurgling girlish voice called over the wires, "Hullo?"

"Hullo, is that Miss Goosey? This is Somers speaking, from the barracks——"

Gushingly the voice took up: "Oh, is that *Billy*? I thought it might be!" and then a giggle.

The young man at the telephone opened his eyes.

"I'm Somers, Billy *Somers!*" he called.

"Yes! So I hear!" from the other side. "Well, Billy?"

Very odd of the girl. What was she trying to play at? Rather stiffly he called, "Have you written to me?"

"Yes! I sent off a note to you by a little boy," came Lily's voice again. "Haven't you got it?"

"Er—yes!—that is——"

"Well, are you coming up here to dinner to-night? Or are you not?" returned the coquettish voice through the telephone.

"Oh! You did mean me to come up to dinner, Miss Goosey?"

"You *are* funny! Of course! What did you think I meant? You're coming, I suppose?"

It was not an unnatural supposition of the girl—that is, of one of the girls—to whom this young man had proposed last night. But he, remembering nothing but that one proposal to Nora, the wilful little lady of his heart, was utterly taken aback by this other, this Goosey girl, who seemed to think she had something to say to him! To be expecting him to dinner! What was it all about? Better go over and see, perhaps.

"Can you wait a minute while I look up whether I'm free this evening? Thanks," he called. He put down the receiver and looked up his pocketbook.

"Thursday, June 10, Deanery, 7.45," he saw. By Jove! In the whirl of excitement over his engagement to Nora, he had forgotten this week-old promise to dine at the Hallidays' this evening!

He took up the receiver again. "Hullo, are you there? I say, I am sorry I can't dine with you to-night. I find I'm booked up to go to the Deanery."

"Oh! How dull!" with a sympathetic giggle from Lily. "When will you come to-morrow, then; lunch?"

"I'm afraid I can't come to lunch," from Billy, with a glàd thought of how Major Wynne-Pritchard had told him to come up to tiffin to-morrow. At one o'clock he would see Nora! "I'm engaged for lunch."

"I shall expect you at tea-time to-morrow, then. How aggravating of you to be so busy just now!" said the persistent girlish voice at the other end of the telephone. "Come early! So long!"

She rang off before Billy could make any excuse for tea-time to-morrow. To-morrow, he was firmly determined, he would pass every spare second of his time with his Nora.

Meantime, he had better hurry up and dress for this duty-dinner at the Deanery. It was perhaps just as well that poor darling little Nora didn't feel up to seeing her lover this evening; he wouldn't feel that it was quite such a cruel waste of time. He'd promised the old Dean that he would go and meet

some people they'd have to stay there—some old Johnnie who had been up at Oxford with the Dean and also with an uncle of his, Billy's, who was now a Bishop. It sounded far from thrilling, the prospect. But never mind, life was all thrills as soon as he turned his mind to the thought of last night.

When Billy Somers reached the old-fashioned, ivy-clad Deanery he found that he must be early. The drawing room was empty but for Lorne Halliday, the Dean's daughter, who was sitting at the piano in her primrose-coloured dinner-gown of Liberty asphodel satin, and looking rather like a Burne-Jones drawing of the Lady of Shalott.

As Billy was announced she rose and came towards him with a pretty flush in her cheeks and a shy, sweet welcome in her dark eyes. To tell you the truth, the Dean's daughter had been wrapped in a sort of happy dream ever since that fatal moment at the dance last night when Billy Somers, under the sway of the M.O.'s deadly drug, had told her he was "serious" and that he cared for her.

No one would have been more entirely flabbergasted than the unconscious Billy if he could have read that girl's thoughts at that moment when he took her hand and shook it heartily.

For Lorne was wondering why he only shook hands with her now—this young man who had kissed her so tenderly last night? And why, after he'd said such wonderful things at the dance, did he come in

now with a cheery matter-of-fact smile on his attractive face, and say something entirely commonplace about it's being a top-hole evening?

It was simple enough, the explanation of this.

The young subaltern standing there before her hadn't the faintest notion—no, not the foggiest—that he'd ever been on anything but “merely friendly” terms with her, even for half an hour. He rather liked Miss Halliday; quite a nice girl even though she was a bit of a bluestocking. She wasn't bad-looking, but that was as much as you could say for any other girl when you compared her with a peach like Nora!

So much for what Billy thought of Miss Lorne Halliday.

She stood there, leaning one slim elbow on the mantelpiece; waiting, expecting, imagining, that he would presently begin to take up the conversation where he'd had to drop it last night and begin to make love to her! But he went on about the weather, and the roses!

How extraordinary young men were, thought poor Lorne. But it must be because she had seen so little of them that she was taken aback by the ways of this one. Presently he would—oh, yes, in a moment or two he would begin to make love to her again. She had got dressed and slipped down early to the drawing room on purpose to give a little time to this lover of hers.

He only smiled at her in a friendly way and enquired: "What time did you get back from the dance last night? Everybody was pretty late, I fancy."

"Oh, yes. No. That is, I don't really remember," murmured Lorne, with her wistful eyes fixed upon his. "It—it was a wonderful dance, wasn't it?"

"Topping," agreed Billy Somers. "There's no doubt our band taked some beating. And the floor was Al, wasn't it?"

"Yes," returned Lorne, blankly. There was a moment's silence in the quiet, old-fashioned room between the tall young soldier-man and the slim, dark girl to whom he'd said, "You're lovely, I think!" She stood, remembering every syllable which he had forgotten. She wondered if he were saying nothing *because he were shy?* She'd read somewhere that the shyness of a man is tenfold deeper than that of a maid. Perhaps this was it? Perhaps he was waiting for encouragement? In that case, the maid would have to open the subject.

Plucking up heart of grace, the girl said, flutteringly, "When I said it was a wonderful dance, I wasn't thinking of the floor, or the band. I was thinking of something else." She made a little shy movement of her hand towards the young man. "I—I think perhaps I had better tell you that—that Father and Mother *noticed!*"

"Noticed?" echoed Billy, enquiringly. He

thought he had not quite caught Miss Halliday's last word. What was it that the Dean and Mrs. Halliday were supposed to have noticed?

"Yes," murmured Lorne, and the rose-coloured flush glowed warmer in her cheeks. "Mother noticed, this morning, that there was something. . . . That I looked as if something had happened. I suppose one really can't help it, when one is very, very happy, you know."

Billy regarded her with some mystification in his honest eyes. These intellectual College girls were awful, even the nicest of them. They began, without warning, to talk in a "clever" way, with quotations out of books that he, Billy, had never heard of. What on earth was Miss Halliday talking about now, in this mysterious way? She said, "So I—told her, and she told Father, and they know all about it already! I hope you—don't mind."

Billy tilted his fair head and looked still more at sea. "Er—I beg your pardon? I don't er—know what you mean about my 'minding.' What should I mind?"

"Oh, well, if you don't mind, it's all right," said Lorne, giving him a shy little smile and looking away again.

"But—er—what is 'all right'?" I'm afraid I don't quite catch what you meant," took up the young soldier, who had walked up the path with his arm girdling her waist only twenty-four hours back.

"What is it you told Mrs. Halliday, Miss Halliday?"

Lorne turned her dark head quickly to look at him. Her eyes were wide, they were full of hurt surprise. If he did not know what she meant, she certainly didn't know what he meant! Had he not made love to her and asked her if she would marry him? Hadn't she accepted him? And hadn't he come here to-night to ask consent of her father—the Dean? Why did he call her "Miss Halliday" and seem not to know what she was talking about?

She said with a reproachful quiver in her soft voice: "I told them—can't you guess? About last night."

"But *what* about last night?" demanded the young man in blankest bewilderment. Naturally!

"Have you forgotten?" asked Lorne, quickly, but with (equally natural) indignation. "Don't you remember what you said to me at the dance?"

CHAPTER IV

IN still deeper bewilderment Billy gazed at the girl, but before he could say again, "Remember what?" there was an interruption.

"Ah, my dear Somers, you have arrived, you have arrived," said an impressive voice. Enter the Dean, Lorne's father. He was always trumpeting forth these announcements of the perfectly obvious, but he was a dear, kindly old gentleman with silver hair and a handsome, Roman profile.

He beamed upon Billy, who had to pull himself together out of the puzzlement into which he had been cast by the odd enquiry of Lorne before her father came in.

"We are a family party only, after all, my young friend," announced the Dean, still beaming. "My friend, who knew your dear uncle and whom I asked you to meet, has been detained. He is not able to be with us to-night."

"Oh! I am sorry——" Billy began.

But the Dean, lifting up his hand as if invoking a blessing, said: "Perhaps it is as well. The party will consist of ourselves only. It is better so, perhaps, *in the circumstances.*"

These last three words were said with a mixture of

solemnity and archness which Billy could not make out at all. The Dean talked almost as if there were a secret to discuss.

Billy certainly wasn't in the secret that this benevolent old gentleman was already prepared to give his consent to his daughter's engagement with all the grace at his command.

At that moment Mrs. Halliday, one of those gentle, faded creatures who are summed up as "not clever, but invaluable in a sick room," flitted in like a grey moth. She also greeted the young man with a wistfully encouraging smile.

"But let us have dinner first, shall we?" said she.

The quartette went into the dining room where portraits of the Dean's ancestors in wigs and Bishop's sleeves gazed benignantly down from the panelled walls upon a dinner-party as much sixes and sevens as hearts could wish.

There, at either end of the table, were Dean Halliday and his wife, happily persuaded that they were entertaining their daughter's accepted suitor. There, with his back to the long windows, sat the young man himself, still puzzling inwardly over what Miss Halliday could have meant by asking him if he remembered what he had said to her at the dance. "Said" to her? Nothing, of course, more than one does say to one's ordinary partners at dances. All the "saying" that was worth remembering had been said to a very different person! And there, opposite

to him, sat Lorne, enduring secret agonies of mortification and suspense.

What could Billy mean? she pondered.

Which did he mean? From his behaviour now, one would think that he meant to ignore last night entirely! Had he not expected her, Lorne, to take it seriously?

But he had said in so many words, "I am serious!"

Why did he go on in this incomprehensible fashion?

"It's too dreadful that I know so little about young men and what they do and why they do it," thought poor Lorne, distractedly, as the soup was handed round. "If only I had learnt more about that and less about Greek particles! Really, it would have been of more use to me."

But for all her "bluestocking" veneer Lorne Haldiday was a real woman at heart. She possessed quite a lot of that feminine quality, impromptu courage.

For it was Lorne, the usually quiet, who took it upon herself to talk that ghastly dinner through. With flushed cheeks and shining eyes above her sorely wounded heart, she started and kept up a positive rattle of conversation.

What was it about? College; but not the bookish side of the life. Descriptions of the various girls; of their boating-parties, their matches, their cocoa-

suppers, their theatricals, their dances . . . altogether a very creditable impressionist sketch of the exceedingly good time that she and other sweet girl-undergraduates had enjoyed at Girton.

"Yes, happy days, happy days!" pronounced the Dean in that impressive voice of his. "The happiest days, I think, in the life of any young person, whether it be a young man or a maid. I recollect somebody telling me once that the years at College, compared with those of after life, were even as a beautifully furnished entrance hall to an otherwise inadequately furnished and disappointing sort of house. One is led to expect too much of Life by that gracious beginning."

"How horribly true, Father!" said Lorne Halliday with an amused smile that cost her a good deal to produce. "Naturally a girl who's had a good time, packed with communal interests at College, is going to find the years that follow very tame. She is so

*'Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of Life.'*

Fancy enjoying the same freedoms and comradeships and achievements as a man, and then coming down, down, down to keeping house and darning socks and——"

"Oh, Lorne darling, don't say such things," pro-

tested her mother, glancing timidly between the two branching Sheffield candlesticks at the girl. "College, and exams, and boating, and reading-parties and those are all very well for a time; but you know, naughty child," with a little smile, "the time comes when things are not enough for a woman. She longs for a home of her own, and for—individual interests. Oh, she does. . . . Doesn't she, Mr. Somers?"

"Oh, yes, rather!" agreed Billy, heartily, over his fish. With a nod of conviction, he added: "Every girl ought to get married, I think. Woman's place, and all that. Ripping. Natural, too." (He was thinking of Nora.)

A ray of hope shot through the dark depression of Lorne at this. After all, Billy Somers must have meant what he said last night, or he could surely never have uttered these words? She ventured a half-smile at him. Young Billy grinned cheerfully back at her; it was his score, he thought.

The Dean and his wife exchanged glances.

"We know what young people are! We haven't forgotten *that evening*, even if it is so many years ago!" said those looks. And by some manœuvring of Mrs. Halliday's the rest of dinner was cut almost ostentatiously short, with the idea of leaving the boy alone with the father of Lorne.

She went out, followed by her daughter.

In the candlelight over the port (the Dean never smoked over his wonderful port!) this silver-haired

Padré and the fair-haired subaltern sat . . . and sat. . . and sat. . . .

And nothing happened.

The Dean waited for the boy to speak. The boy was only half there; the other half of him being wrapped in a blissful day-dream about to-morrow's lunch with Nora; especially the after-lunch part. They would stroll off into the garden, he and she, and she would say——

"You should read Cobbett's *Letters to a Young Man*, my dear Somers, you should indeed," the voice of the Dean came booming through his reverie. "Cobbett, though perhaps scarcely modern in style, is still excellent in tone, and full of invaluable advice. His principles, invariably sound! Take his views of domestic bliss——!"

"Yes; I am afraid I haven't read any of them, sir," responded Billy—of whom I may as well admit at once that the dear lad never read anything whatsoever except *The Sporting Times* and a little Kipling.

"Or again there is a less ambitious work by a brother of my own cloth," pursued the Dean, thinking that this might smooth the way for the young suitor. "It is entitled *How to be Happy Though Married*."

"Oh, really! I think I've heard of that. I shall have to get it," responded Nora's lover.

Another pause.

Billy was wondering how soon he could decently get away. The Dean wondered how much longer this diffident youth (as he called him to himself) would take before he began to plead his cause. Did he consider that he had not yet been given an opening? Again the old man turned, very graciously, to the young man at his table.

"May I say," he observed, gently, "that I hope, nay, I am confident, that there will be no need for text-books to aid you to find happiness in your projected marriage?"

"Er—what?" said Billy, quickly raising his head and turning his frank, clear eyes, full of surprise, upon his host. To himself he was saying: "Great Scott, does the old Johnnie know all about me and Nora already, then? Now, who on earth told him? Or is it just guesswork on his part?"

And he blurted out, "Well, I'm sure it's awfully kind of you, Mr. Halliday, but——"

"Not at all, not at all: surely not," smiled the Dean, kindly. "In a sense, no doubt, you should be the one to speak first, my dear young friend; but, in the circumstances—I can tell you that I well remember the evening when I, at your present age, interviewed Mrs. Halliday's father. Ah me! I was a pale young curate then."

"Yes. Of course," said Billy, politely; inwardly horrified to notice that reminiscences were coming up. He knew what a long time these took!

"And therefore," pursued the Dean in his pulpit-voice, "I may tell you that you have really nothing to fear."

"Oh! That's awfully good of you, sir, I'm sure," from Billy, wondering how this guileless old patriarch could answer for another girl's parents.

"My Lorne," pursued the Dean, reflectively, "is a girl whom we expected to marry into some professorial or intellectual *milieu*. The wife of the Master of one of the Colleges. . . . But no, Somers. Of course you cannot be expected to see her in that light. And I myself have often heard that very successful marriages are those of *contrast*. So, since my daughter seems willing to exchange her Greek dictionary for a packet of love-letters and *confess* that the sword is mightier than the pen——"

Here, of course, the Dean was just about to bring matters to a climax by saying that they welcomed Billy as a son-in-law, when something happened that put an end to all further conversation and all thought of anything else for the rest of the evening.

The dining-room door burst open to a sudden, shrill, feminine cry of, "Fire! Fire! The house is on fire!"

The next five minutes were all commotion and excitement.

Out dashed Billy to find a group of frightened women huddled in the hall, Mrs. Halliday, Lorne, and the maids; while volumes of smoke were pouring

down the narrow corridor from the green baize door that led from the kitchen.

It was the oak-panelled kitchen where the fire had broken out, thanks to a careless maid and a basket of shavings left too near the range.

"Got any extinguishers?" Billy shouted. Then, without waiting for an answer, he seized a minimax from the hall and ran through into the kitchen.

Before he could bring the extinguisher to pay out the flames which had caught one side of the wooden wall, he found that not only fire, but water, had invaded the place. For a second he could not think whence it came, the sudden cataract from above that drenched him from head to foot!

A moment later: "It is the cistern!" he called; "your cistern up above has collapsed and broken. Well, anyhow, that's put the fire out."

The kitchen was a wet waste of puddles, smouldering wood, and suffocating smoke and steam.

There was little time for politeness and thanks. The Dean himself hurried Billy into his overcoat and implored his young friend to rush back to barracks and change, which he did. His glance back at the Deanery porch showed him the figure of Lorne, in her primrose-coloured dinner-gown, watching his flight with eyes of unspeakable admiration. No doubt she thought he had done something heroic.

Billy looked anything but heroic in his drenched dress-clothes, crumpled shirt front, and streaming

hair, as he reached his own quarters. But, even before he got out of his wet things, he read the telephone message that had been brought up to his bedroom by his servant. "A message from Major Wynne-Pritchard's house." What he read was rather more of a dash of cold water in his face than what he had already got from the broken cistern.

"Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard says, will Mr. Somers please not come to lunch to-morrow after all. She is writing to explain."

CHAPTER V

HIS first thought, of course, was that the adored Nora was ill. Her headache must have meant something serious. Very serious, for her to refuse to see her lover.

Was it too late for him to ring her up to-night?

No; he could try. Shedding his drenched dress-clothes, Billy crammed on some dry things and dashed down to the telephone in the anteroom. In real alarm he rang up the Wynne-Pritchards' house, and was answered by the invaluable maid.

"I want to know how Miss Wynne-Pritchard is, please? Mr. Somers speaking."

He was told that Miss Nora's headache seemed to have gone; she had come down to dinner and seemed quite herself again. This was reassuring; but it didn't explain why Miss Nora's lover was not to have his promised lunch with her after all. He must have a word with her.

"Can't I speak to Miss Wynne-Pritchard for a second?" he called, eagerly; oblivious of the glance that was cast at his back by a man passing through the anteroom at that moment; Hunter, to wit, the M.O. (And the hidden cause of all his troubles!)

"I'll see, sir," said Mary at the other end of the

telephone. But a moment later she reports, "Miss Wynne-Pritchard has gone to bed."

So that was all that was possible to-night.

The disconcerted Billy strolled into the billiard room and managed to beat his opponent pretty thoroughly, but with little satisfaction to himself. He remembered something that a man had once confided him: "When I'm thoroughly off my game, it seems to mean that everything's going well about my girl; and t'other way round."

Things were "going" most inexplicably about Billy's sweetheart.

When was he to be allowed to see her again? He was hungry for the sight of her, starving for another kiss. He'd only had that one little minute, after they were engaged. And what was that? Just like a cup of tea at Stafford to a ravenous traveller!

Well, there was nothing to be done but to wait until the next morning.

Next morning brought another disappointment to this sorely tried young man. No letter!

Not a line from the White House, either from Nora or her mother! And they'd promised to write, to "explain" last night's message. Should he ring up again? But no. He hardly could do that when they'd said they'd write. A note might be sent round by hand while he was on parade. He could only wait. . . .

How Billy fumed! And what a time his recruits

did get! ("What's the matter with this man's boots? What? Look at 'em! . . . And your buttons? And when did you last get your hair cut?" etc., etc., etc.)

Presently he cooled down somewhat. Certainly he would get a note by the second post. Perhaps it wasn't that Nora, but that somebody else was ill; an aunt or something. Still, one of them might have written. Again he fidgeted, jumpily. He felt he couldn't possibly lunch in Mess to-day.

And then the thought came into his mind of that invitation to lunch which had been given to him yesterday by the Goosey girl. She seemed to want to see him about something. He might as well get that off his mind while his time was free. It was probably something about theatricals these Goosey people wanted to get up: or perhaps a gymkhana in their gardens; she wanted to consult him . . . he was considered something of a "nut" at getting up sports.

Once more he went to the telephone ("I live at the beastly telephone, these days," grumbled Billy as he took down the receiver), rang up The Retreat, announced that Mr. Somers found that he was disengaged after all (yes, "disengaged" was actually the word he used!), and that if he might he'd come up, as he'd been asked yesterday, at one-thirty.

"Oh, do!" called the gushing little voice of Lily

Goosey at the other end of the telephone. "I was afraid you couldn't get off until this afternoon. How ripping!"

From Ditchwater Barracks to The Retreat was about two miles up the valley of the Loam. It would make him too late to walk, so he took out his little white two-seater, the Banshee, so called from her ear-piercing hooter. He was tooling her along the prettiest stretch of Love Lane, between tall hedges where the wild rose was just now in all her glory, when he saw in the distance, speeding along towards town on a bicycle, a girl.

His heart jumped joyfully.

Even while she was a speck in the distance he recognised the pink linen suit, the crisp, white Panama hat.

Nora!

Hurrah! Now everything would be all right. What luck! Nearer and nearer she came bicycling along; but she hadn't seen him, Billy, yet.

Still nearer, he could see her face, but she hadn't noticed him; nearer, near enough for him to see the little, dark, wind-blown curl upon her cheek as he slowed down the car. How should he greet her? He'd jump down, shut the engine off (no use leaving it running, he wasn't going to hurry). Then he'd catch her as she slid off the bike; he'd stick the machine up against that gate where that glimpse

of daisied meadow showed; and he'd say, "I say, my darl——"

His impatient thoughts had galloped on as far as this when the unbelievable thing happened.

Nora was not twenty yards away from him—not ten——

She came up level with him——

And then she was past; past without a look! No, worse than that, with a face that had no more expression on it than a new-laid egg. Her Irish eyes seemed to be gazing, straight through the head of her flabbergasted lover, at the Cathedral spires of Ditchwater and at the roofs of the Deanery in the distance.

Another second, and Nora Wynne-Pritchard on her bicycle had whisked down the hill and was lost to sight.

Billy sat there as if he were some sort of motor-centaur, incapable even of getting up from his seat or of taking his hands off the wheel.

Only his head was turned in the direction in which she had disappeared.

Cut?

She'd *cut* him? Nora?

She'd treated him as if he were a milestone on the road?

Her bicycle was not leaning up against the gate of that daisied field. He was *not* holding her in his arms; *not* murmuring in her ear——



Cut? She'd cut him? Nora?

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Straight past him with that look?

Now what——

For a second the impulse took him to turn the Banshee's nose for Ditchwater again, and to chase Nora back to her very door, there to find out the reason for all this. But that was impossible. She must have thought she had her reasons for what she'd done and it would look so ridiculous to chase her like a—a cinema film, he thought. So; couldn't turn back and drive beside a girl on a bicycle who kept her face turned the other way, or hold her up at her own doors. He must go up formally to the Wynne-Pritchards' and demand an explanation. He'd do it as soon as she'd had time to get indoors.

Then two Tommies passed up Love Lane, and as he took their salute, the young soldier pulled himself together a little.

He then found he was angry. Dashed angry. This was some hideous misunderstanding, of course. But whatever it was, surely the girl might have given him the benefit of the doubt! Surely she might have told him what it was all about before turning him down as brutally as that!

If she wanted to have a "row" with him about anything, why not have a row, instead of handing him the Cut Infernal, or whatever they called it? Besides, what had he, Billy, ever done, all the time he'd been stationed at Ditchwater, at which she could

possibly take offence? His conscience on that score was as clear as the noonday sun above him.

He'd write and— No! he wouldn't write. Nor would he telephone again. He'd go straight back and have it out. Perhaps the word "telephone" reminded him of the forgotten fact that he was on his way to lunch with the Gooseys.

Blow the Gooseys!

Billy didn't want to talk gymkhana with them after all this. But he'd proposed himself and must go. His anger over the rank injustice of Nora's behaviour to him helped him there. Yes. He'd go to the Gooseys; he'd call on Nora on his way back, when she'd had time to think over what she'd done.

Cut, and by his own newly made fiancée!

Still feeling dashed and dazed, he made the rest of the distance up to the big, ornate iron gates of The Retreat. The Gooseys had built a lodge the size of an ordinary house, and had made a long carriage-drive between plantations of very new shrubs up to the house, which one saw staring in all its grey-stone newness and vastness in the distance, ornamented by all the stonework, dates, dragons, and coats-of-arms that money can buy.

On the drive Billy encountered what looked like a positive flock of white frocks and yellow heads. It was composed of the younger Gooseys—or goslings! All girls, all pretty, all with abundant lemon-yellow hair. . . .

Billy didn't know how many there were of Miss Lily Goosey's younger sisters, eight or ten. They were like the Irishman's pigs, who ran about so that he couldn't count them. At the sight of the Banshee all the goslings raised a concerted screech of welcome.

"Oh, here's Mr. Somers. . . . How-did-do! How-did-do! Oh, here's Mr. Somers in his car, come to see Lil. . . . Run, Elsie, and tell her; yes, you run!"

Elsie (whichever she was) ran. Two or three of the other goslings ran with her, disappearing behind the shrubs to take a short cut up to the house. The remaining half-dozen or so of her sisters ran alongside the slowed-down car, waved their hands, and beamed upon the visitor with all their blue eyes and pink faces. Billy, who liked children, waved his hat in his friendliest way and then drove on, leaving the group of white frocks clustering together to look after him, the noise of their little-girl chatter and giggles followed him all the way up to the house.

At the house a stately man-servant, who made even the six-foot-two Billy look a merely average-sized young man, informed him that Miss Goosey was awaiting him in the southern rose garden to which he directed him.

Billy walked under an arch and through a green gate. He found himself in a garden with winding paths and seats and roses, roses all the way. It was a riot of colour and fragrance. There were roses grown formally, roses that spilled themselves,

helter-skelter, from great stone vases held up by a crowd of cupids; lattices of roses, roses in towers, roses red and white, crimson and creamy; one big bouquet under the blue June sky that blazed down upon the velvet grass-paths.

The whole place was the kind of "set " that a stage-manager would have adored for Act Two.

And there among the flowers stood Lily Goosey in a white frock with a broad hat that was pink next her golden hair and white above, with dangling blue ribbons. The girl looked just as every stage *ingénue* would love to look.

And she hadn't a thought in her head except that everything was absolutely *ripping*.

She saw Billy coming in, and she beamed like the sunshine itself. For a minute she stood preening herself in all her young vanity, knowing that she must be looking her very best, and allowing the young man to take it all in as he walked up the path to her. Then, because she wasn't much more than a school-girl, full to the brim of high spirits and the joy of Life and the sense of her own new importance, she gave a little frisky skip on the sunny path, and ran to meet him, swinging her hat by its ribbons.

She felt, like Yum-yum, that life was a joke that had just begun. Wasn't it A1? Look at the heavenly weather; just the sort of weather to be engaged in! And how perfectly 'twhee the new frock looked, on. Just the frock for a girl who'd got

engaged! Two weeks after she was eighteen, too: *just* the age to be engaged at, Lily considered. And here was her real live *flancé* come to see her! Such a nice soldier-boy, just exactly the sort of person to get engaged to! Lovely!

"At last!" she gurgled, guilelessly, to young Somers as she danced up to him, a flutter of curls and skirts and ribbons. "So here you are! Thought you'd never be able to get off! How are you, Billy-boy?"

And what was the next thing that happened?

Before young Somers could suspect what Miss Goosey was about to do, she put both small hands on his shoulders, gave a little jump up like a child bobbing for an apple out of its reach, and bestowed upon his cheek an affectionate and resounding kiss.

CHAPTER VI

BILLY SOMERS, all among the roses, stared wildly about him as if for the nearest rabbit-hole to bolt down.

She'd kissed him. . . . Called him "Billy-boy" and *planted* that kiss on him!

And barely a quarter of an hour before, for the first time in his life, he had been cut as dead as dammit!

Now I don't attempt to make out that while young Somers had never in his life been cut before, he had never been kissed. He was in his twenty-fourth year, remember, and he wasn't a prig, or a freak, or a fool. But— Never, never had a kiss been foisted upon him, so to speak, under such circumstances as these. To say that it took his breath away is to put it feebly. For when one does succeed in shocking the average young man, the primmest of maiden-aunts is "not in it" with his sense of outrage. (He has arrears to make up.) So Billy Somers was shocked to his toes by the behaviour of this golden-haired girl of eighteen. He had always considered her a giggling little idiot, of course; but, dash it all! quite a *nice* girl. That is, the sort of girl who would be

asked to play tennis with "his" Nora, and all that kind of thing. (If he still had a Nora? He didn't know!)

"Talk about the modern, fast, forward, flighty flapper! By Gad, this one beats any cartoon in the *Mirror*," the disgusted thoughts might have whirled through Billy's fair head if he had been still capable of thinking at all. "Why, this little thing only left school last term, I know. Finishing school. Is that what they call 'finish'? It's about finished me. Look at her . . . the minx . . . the little minx!"

The little minx, all unconscious of his sentiments, had slipped her dimpled arm into Billy's very limp-feeling one, and was drawing him to stroll beside her up the path again towards a bench placed beneath a bower of Princess Patricia roses.

She babbled, brook-like, as they went.

"What's the matter with you this morning? You're as stiff as a poker! Haven't you anything to say for yourself?" Miss Goosey demanded, archly, smiling up into his face with eyes as cloudless as the skies above them.

Billy, holding himself as stiffly as a moving target at the Range as he was led along, determined that never again would he believe in the harmlessness of a girl who gazed straight into a man's face with innocent blue eyes—which was a sound general principle, but a cruel injustice to poor little Lily, who was really as innocent as she looked.

"What the dickens am I to say to this awful kid?" pondered the young soldier in all consternation. "She ought to be— Well, I suppose she's too old to be spanked. She ought to be locked up in her room as they did to the girls in the good old days, and fed on dry bread and water for a week. It would serve her right. It's just what she wants! Her mother certainly ought to know about her goings-on. I wonder what Mrs. Goosey would think: she always seemed a decent enough old girl. . . ."

And then for the first time finding his voice Billy demanded of his companion with what breath he had, "Where's your mother?"

"Oh, Ma's in the drawing room," replied the charmer at his side, with great serenity, "but she won't be expecting us in for a little time. She won't wait lunch for us, Billy. When I told her you were coming up, she said she supposed it would be a case of Phyllis and Cecil all over again. You know Phyllis is my cousin who stayed here with her *fiancé* last Easter," chattered Miss Goosey, "and at meal-times it was a case of puzzle-find-'em, as Pa said. They were simply always wandering off and getting lost. So Ma said she was nicely broken in!"

"Broken in—" Did the Goosey child mean this for a horsey remark? Was she still dazzled by her father's stables, as new and immense as everything else about this florid place? After that kiss, nothing

could surprise Billy that morning. With an effort he pulled himself together, and spoke in a tone of the most matter-of-fact politeness, a tone that ought to put any "fast, forward, flighty flapper" into her place.

"Well, what about this gymkhana?" he asked. "Or the tennis-tournament?"

"The what?"

"Well, whatever it is. You wanted—something of the sort, didn't you? Or another dance, perhaps?" he suggested in a detached voice. "These early summer dances are rather fun, aren't they?"

"Fun?" Lily's blue eyes beamed fondly up into his. Her dimpled fingers gave his arm a little squeeze. "Oh, but I don't suppose any dance will quite come up to *that* one! They say it's never *quite* the same, Billy!"

Then, as Billy opened his mouth, she went on: "And Pa took it so splendidly! I was quite surprised. You see, all his life Pa's been doing just the one thing: making money. I thought he'd never think of anything else. People like Pa mostly don't, I thought. But no! 'Money isn't everything,' he said. He actually did! 'At any rate not when you've got enough of your own to scratch alone with,' he said. 'Money's only to buy things with after all, if you *can* buy 'em, and sometimes Family can where Money can't! I grant you that,' he said, 'even now!'"

Billy, who had shut his mouth, now opened it again, but he was not to get a word in edgewise even yet.

"Yes; I think Pa was *'twice* about it all," the perfectly unconscious Miss Goosey babbled on; "but I expect it's partly Ma's doing. It's she who's always got Pa on, really; it's no use pretending Pa's family were anything, because they weren't, you know. But Ma was always ambitious, especially for us girls. Ma made him retire and build this place. Pa would have been quite happy in our other house, near Wigan, with just a bow-window in each side of the front door, and a little greenhouse on the end of the house, but Ma said, 'No. The girls have got to have their chances,' said Ma, 'and not just with business people, either.' Ma always loves reading that piece in the paper where it says all about Lady This and Lord That and the Honourable Percy Dolittle has passed a slightly better night. 'There's Lil nearly sixteen now,' said Ma, 'and I want to see her making different sort of friends!'"

Through all this rigmarole Billy was wondering whether he was on his head or his heels, and above all why the social ambitions of Mrs. Goosey should be expected to interest him?

"Ma knew about your mother being an Honourable and all that about your uncles and that; she asked the Dean, I know; and——"

Here the kittenish young thing clapped her hands, still holding his arm, and broke off: "Oh! Fancy me forgetting about what happened at the Deanery last night! Why, of course! We heard all about you being there to dinner whey they set the house on fire. The butcher's boy told Jane here that Mrs. Halliday said that you'd been ever so brave and saved all their lives; how wonderful of you, Billy, I shall have to feel so proud of you, shan't I? Well, anyhow, the cistern's burst. And so off Pa rushed. He *would*! Any job of that sort and Pa must be poking his nose into it still, and never mind what Ma says about his being retired now. I expect he's telling the Dean exactly what to do about it at this minute, and then hunting up all the plasterers in the neighbourhood and setting them to work and giving them a hand himself, up to his eyes in it and forgetting all about not having had anything to eat since half-past eight—" Here she paused for breath and went off at another tangent.

"There's chicken-salad for lunch and a lovely gooseberry fool!" she said, with a little sigh of genuine, schoolgirl greediness. "I do love gooseberry fool made with ever such lots of real thick cream, Billy, don't you? We'll go in, shall we? After all— Well, even engaged people have got to eat, I suppose?"

"Engaged people," had she said?

"Engaged?" Billy echoed, blankly; coming to a

standstill, and then taking a step back that shook off Lily Goosey's fingers from his arm. "But—but—er—who's been talking about it?"

He was dumfounded to think that this girl should know anything about his having proposed to Nora Wynne-Pritchard! Should call him an engaged person!

She went on in her rapid, girlish babble: "Oh, of course I know it isn't '*announced*' yet! The family comes first, as Ma says. But," with a coaxing look, and taking a step nearer to the young man again, "I do hope you mean to announce it soon! So much nicer, isn't it?" Smiling, she held up her pink face, almost as if she expected—yes!—that he should kiss it this time! Or was he mad to think so? On the other hand, was she mad?

Billy, once more pulling himself together, took hold of the situation.

"I say, listen to me one minute, will you, please?" he began, politely but firmly. "We—we seem to be at cross-purposes, somewhere. Before we go on any further, may I ask you one or two questions, Miss Goosey?"

"Certainly, *Mr. Somers!*" returned Lily, coquettishly. She turned to a pouting rosebud on a bush beside her and broke it from the stem. She meant to put that in Billy's buttonhole as soon as he'd finished pretending to be formal and stand-offish. He

said: "First of all, please tell me who told you about this engagement?"

"Who told me?" she echoed.

"Yes."

Lily stared. "Told me about the engagement? Well, but—gracious me, who *should* have?"

He thought no one but Nora could have done that. Very quickly he asked the surprised and innocent chatterbox before him, "Have you seen Miss Wynne-Pritchard since the night of the dance?"

Lily dropped the rosebud. "Miss Nora Wynne-Pritchard? No. I haven't seen her or heard anything about her. Why?"

"Why?" he echoed, sharply. "You *haven't*? Then what engagement are you talking about?"

Lily Goosey, half-vexed, half-laughing at his absurdity, retorted, "Why, ours!"

"*Ours?*"

"Yes, of course, silly boy. Yours and mine. Mine to you," she enlarged, playfully. "Yours to me. There!"

She had stooped to pick up the rosebud from the path, and consequently missed the extraordinary, the unearthly expression that dawned upon the face of Billy Somers at this.

"Didn't you know I'd told Pa and Ma about it?" she chattered, picking a leaf to put behind the bud.

Billy's mouth had this time fallen open of its own accord, and quite widely, but no sound came from it as yet. "I'm never much good at keeping anything to myself. I thought you'd see from my note that they knew already about us getting engaged at the dance!"

Billy Somers, the betrothed of Miss Nora Wynne-Pritchard (also of Miss Lorne Halliday and of Miss Lily Goosey), stood there as if firmly rooted in the garden as any of the rosebushes. At last words came to him. They seemed to fall from him one by one.

"Your father and mother—your father, Mr. Goosey, 'knows already' that you are engaged—to *me*?"

"Yes! That's all right," said the Lily of the Valley, cheerfully.

"I must see your father at once then," announced Billy, firmly.

"Oh, at once?" pouted Lily, very politely, opening those great blue eyes at him. What an odd *fiancé* he was, to be sure, thought she; and after the other night and all, when he hadn't even had time to kiss her, Lil, before the dance was over! . . . Very different from Phyllis' young man! Still, perhaps it was "the thing" with these Families and Honourables to get all the business side of the engagement fixed up before they allowed themselves to be late for meals with the girl herself.

He said, quite curtly, "Did you say your father had gone over to the Deanery? Right. I'll go straight there to see him."

And without another word or a look behind Billy was off.

CHAPTER VII

YOUNG SOMERS began his return trip by dashing down the road at full speed with every ounce the Banshee could do—for a hundred yards only. Then he pulled her up dead-slow, and tooled along, thinking in jerks over what had happened.

He was engaged, it seemed, to two girls at once.

Engaged to two girls. *Two* of 'em! One for each hand. *Bigamy*, by Gad! It was incredible; it was inconceivable; it was—well, it just *wasn't* so.

He knew perfectly well it wasn't so, in spite of what the Goosey girl had been babbling.

She, of course, must be mad. Dotty. Balmy. Off her onion, thought Mr. Somers, relapsing into the terms of a song at the Loamshires' last smoker; off her nut.

She didn't even know that he was engaged to Nora Wynne-Pritchard, but she was going about telling her people that he was engaged to her: Lily.

And now he, Billy, had got to go and explain to Mr. Goosey that his daughter ought by rights to be packed off to the nearest lunatic asylum.

Not so easy. No wonder he'd slowed the Banshee down from that furious pace! It would be a ghastly

job explaining to Mr. Goosey— Yet the Deanery gate, behind which Mr. Goosey was to be found, was coming nearer and nearer.

Suddenly Billy found himself shirking it. He couldn't do it. Not until he'd made up his mind what to say.

He would have driven past the Deanery gate. But at the gate there appeared Mrs. Halliday, who came forward, welcomingly. He was obliged to stop, and listen to the gentle lady's thanks about his promptness over the fire last night.

—"And of course you're coming in to lunch," she said, smiling up at the young man. "It's rather a pity; Mr. Goosey is here, talking to Horace about the cistern, but——"

"Oh, then I won't come in; I won't come in," he said, hastily.

"Oh, you must," Lorne's mother urged him. "I don't think Mr. Goosey can be going to stay much longer. And, *besides*——" she added with a smile.

The true meaning of a whole conversation is to be found in the "And, *besides*——" added by a woman. Mrs. Halliday meant that Billy was to finish his interrupted interview with Lorne's father, his *tête-à-tête* with Lorne. She dragged him in.

"The Dean is with Mr. Goosey in the kitchen," said she, and led Billy into the midst of that scene of wreckage.

Even as they walked down the passage they heard

the voice of Lily Goosey's parent, directing, with equal good-nature and gusto, the reconstruction.

—"and run a h' 'H-girder from 'ere to 'ere; bed on the wall-plate, and that wall would take the outward thrust without any tie-rod. I don't 'old with tie-rods"—(the only H Mr. Goosey had was in the girder). "Bad workmanship, Dean!"

"Ah, yes. Undoubtedly, undoubtedly," put in the voice of the Dean, vaguely. As his wife and Billy came in he was standing there with a creditable effort to take an intelligent interest in something that was not nearly as familiar as Greek to him. Beside the stately-looking, silver-haired scholar stood Mr. Goosey in checks as loud as his voice. Baggy knickerbockers and hand-knitted sport's-stockings adorned his short legs; he had one of his own prize pink roses in his buttonhole. In one hand he carried a hunting-crop, in the other a cigar the size of a baby Zeppelin (at which he took surreptitious puffs, like a passenger in a Tube lift, in order to keep it alight), and a very horsey-looking cap. You see, Mr. Goosey played—that is to say he was learning to play—golf. And what is the use of that, if a man doesn't dress the part? But he was now deep in a game dearer to his own heart. "Now, I'll send you along Dorman Long's catalogue and I'll mark the page and I'll undertake to get it for you at cost price——"

"Most kind, most kind——" from the Dean.

"Say it's from me. Thomas Goosey. P'r'aps you could add 'of Wigan.' Yes. Providence Works, Wigan. And now about your cistern." He waved towards it with the hunting-crop. "I should 'ave—let me see—" He scratched his bald head with the other hand from which he shifted the cigar. "I should 'ave at least four 'undred gallon. Where's the nozzle—" he bustled about to the right, "Where's the nozzle ye fasten the 'ose on? Ah! 'Ere 'tis. Now," impressively, "that's wrong, Dean."

"Possibly, possibly——"

"I tell you that's wrong. It ought to be wire-wound for at least three feet from the nozzle and then the nozzle don't split. Brass unions" (with a lifted finger), "then your good Lady won't always 'ave to be wrapping dish-clouts round it when she's wanting to water the garden. You come up to The Retreat one day and I'll show you these things as they 'ad ought to be."

"Ah, yes, yes," from the Dean. "Practical knowledge, practical knowledge. . . . Dignity of Labour——"

"I'll show you my new gravel-washing machine for the paths," Mr. Goosey promised him with many explanatory flourishes of the crop. "I've got my own gravel pit. Clean, sharp stuff," he enlarged, gloatingly. "*Beautiful!*" Then, clutching the Dean's arm, "I'll send you a load over."

"Extremely kind, more than kind," murmured the

somewhat exhausted Dean. He had been listening to this voice for the whole of the morning. So had his wife, before fetching Billy. As for Billy himself, he had just left this genial person's house, the house (according to Miss Goosey) of Billy's father-in-law elect. (Hades!)

Now, much as the young soldier admired Mr. Goosey's "practical knowledge" (it meant more to him than it did to the Dean, and he wished he had a tenth part of it to spend on the so-troublesome camp drainage!) it would take more than that to reconcile him with marriage to a girl with "delusions" about imaginary proposals. And he was engaged to Nora, and, dash it all, he could *not* have proposed to the other one?

"'Owever," pursued the untiring voice of Lily's father, "I 'aven't yet 'ad a look at the h'opposite h'end of the h' H-girder——"

He turned, and came face to face with young Somers.

"Ah!" he vociferated. He dropped the hunting-crop. He took out the cigar, which was in his mouth for the moment, and pitched it out of the open doorway into a cabbage bed. Then he advanced with both hands upon the Dean's other guest.

"Ah! 'Oo 'ave we 'ere?" he cried, joyfully. "Mr. Somers, or Billy, as I suppose I shall 'ave to call 'im now. 'Ow are you, Billy, my boy?"

Billy took one of the proffered hands, enduring its

grip without wincing. Then straightway began to wonder wildly how he could get out of this house. It wasn't possible in the Dean's presence to confide the highly private matter to that honest soul. He must cut; he must——

The voice of Mrs. Halliday, who had been fluttering unhappily in the background, broke in softly at his elbow, "Of course you'll stay and have some lunch——"

"No, thank you; no!" from Mr. Goosey. "No. The wife is expecting me. I'm off. I know your dinner's getting cold." He put on the cap; took it off again. Impressively he added: "Now, just one minute. What about that universal?"

Mrs. Halliday turned a pathetic glance upon Billy; instantly caught by the other visitor.

"Billy don't mind waiting 'alf a minute," declared Mr. Goosey with a slap upon the young man's shoulder which, being unexpected, made him reel. "I'm going to take 'im back 'ome with me. We've got a few little things to talk about, me an' 'im. 'Aven't we, Billy?"

Here Billy Somers took the law into his own hands. For the last four hours he'd seemed to be blown about like a straw in conflicting winds. Now he took charge of himself.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, firmly, "but I've got to push straight off to barracks now. Good-bye for the present," he said, generally.

"But—" began the Dean.

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| "But you've had no lunch!" said Mrs. Halliday. | } all at once. |
| "But you 'aven't 'ad no dinner!" said Mr. Goosey. | |

Billy Somers didn't want either lunch or dinner. He was "fed" in a very different sense. He forgot the need of other food. He forgot to say "good-bye" again.

Two minutes later he'd forgotten the Banshee.

For striding down the path, the horror of his position overwhelmed him once again.

An irresistible craving took him to unburden his troubles to somebody; tell some other person all about them; get another opinion. If it hadn't been that old Goosey had been there, he might have talked to the Dean; nice old boy, the Dean. Mrs. Halliday, too, and the girl; they were nice. Friendly, sympathetic. Women, in some ways, were much easier to confide in than men. At least about engagements, and things like that.

Suddenly he thought of a woman to whom he could turn in a difficulty: Mrs. Hallett, the wife of his best friend, the Adjutant. *Yes!* It was full of this resolution that he walked straight past his own car, drawn up a little beside the path.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. HALLETT was thirty-one, six months older than her husband. For this reason, and because she was popular among the junior officers, she insisted on referring to herself as The Baby-Snatcher. "The Hag," "that Hallett Object," were other names for herself in public. In private she had once confided to her husband, "I wouldn't swap my hands and feet for any woman's pretty face."

"Or your tongue," suggested her husband. His attitude was that he had married her out of pity.

They lived, extremely happily, in a small house 2,620 yards away from the barracks. The Adjutant knew this distance because of the number of revolutions made by the wheels of the bicycle on which he went to and from his work.

Billy had walked this 2,620 yards when he met Mrs. Hallett coming out of her own gate.

"Hullo! Has something gone wrong with the Banshee?" she greeted him. "That's a pity, because I'm going shopping, and you might have given the old woman and her parcels a lift."

"The Banshee . . . oh, Lord!" ejaculated Billy. "I must have left her somewhere!"

"Left her?" repeated the Adjutant's wife, gazing up at him. "Left it behind you, you mean, like an umbrella?" She began to twinkle all over her plain, mobile face. "Jim told me you'd gone up to the Gooseys; what did they give you for lunch, Mr. Somers?"

"Lunch—" Quite suddenly Billy discovered that he was ravenously hungry. "Look here, Mrs. Hallett, you'll have to give me some. D'you mind? Or some tea, or whatever time it is——"

Time, on a day such as Billy was now living through, is not measurable by hours. The Adjutant's wife took that in with another twinkle. She had never seen Billy Somers like this before, she thought, as she stripped her gloves off her pretty hands and hurried before him into the hall. Poor boy, he had "got it bad"!

A mixed meal of cold mutton, cake, sardines, bread-and-cheese, jam, coffee, whiskey-and-soda was hurriedly produced and set before Billy in the rather poky little dining room where a collection of very ramshackle furniture seemed rather at variance with the really good silver. The famished Billy ate and drank in silence for some minutes. Presently he looked up at his hostess.

"Jim isn't in, is he? On duty—thanks be. It's you I wanted to talk to, really——"

"Of course. Do help yourself to some cold meat,

won't you? And now tell me," said Mrs. Hallett, "what is it?"

"It's the Devil and all his angels," muttered Billy, taking up the carving-knife again. "Two of 'em, anyhow. I've put my foot into it this time, Mrs. Hallett!"

"D'you mean—I'll get some more bread—d'you mean about the car?"

"Car—oh, blow the car. Something far more important," said Billy. "I—well, I suppose Jim told you——"

"About your engagement; yes, he did mention it," replied the Adjutant's wife, demurely. "I wasn't sure if one was to congratulate you yet. I do so now. I really am very, very glad, Mr. Somers." She glanced at the clouded young face above the wreck of the cold mutton and added, rather surprised, "So are you, of course?"

"I—I don't know whether I am or not!" He meant "engaged." She meant "glad." She gazed at him.

"Don't *know*? You don't know? But why not?"

"Well, for one thing she did cut me——"

"Cut you?" Mrs. Hallett stared. "When?"

"This very morning, in Love Lane!"

"Cut—? But—for what reason?"

"Sure *I* don't know!" said Billy Somers, devouring biscuit and butter.

"Oh! So that's what you want me to find out for

you," returned Mrs. Hallett, leaning her elbow on the table and preparing to enjoy this interview. "These young lovers with their quarrels always turn to the mothers in Israel——"

"Not a bit of it. Lover's quarrels, indeed," said Billy, ruefully, but eating away. "That's only a bit of it, anyhow. It's not as easy as all *that*; just what *one* girl means! The fact is—thank you, I've got plenty—the fact is, as far as I can see, there's nobody except Miss Goosey and I and her people who can have been supposed to know about this thing," he began, wildly enough, where men generally do begin—at the wrong end of the story. "And I give you my word I knew nothing. So that leaves Miss Goosey and her blessed parents!"

"Leaves them where?" asked Mrs. Hallett, blankly. "With the car?"

Billy, putting aside his plate at last, leant earnestly forward over the table. "Lily Goosey said she hadn't said a word to anybody but them—the father and mother. Her father and mother, I mean; not the others."

The Adjutant's wife gazed at him. "Now, Mr. Somers, be calm," she begged him. "Don't say anything that I don't ask you. Have another peg. There. Now. *What* is this about? You said it hadn't got anything to do with the car——"

"Well, I was in the car when she cut me!"

"Who cut you? Miss Goosey?"

"No, no!" Billy set down his glass and shook his fair head with some vigour. "No! Nora. Miss Wynne-Pritchard!"

"What? You said it wasn't a quarrel. Was Miss Goosey with you in the car, then?"

"No!" from Billy. "Of course not!"

"Well"—Mrs. Hallett offered him, patiently, the cigarettes—"where is the car now?"

"At the Deanery, I suppose!"

"What had you gone to the Deanery for?" his hostess asked, quickly, "to get a special license, or something?"

"Lord, no! I was going to see old Goosey, and—then I thought I wouldn't—" explained Billy. "Only Mrs. Halliday dragged me in!"

"What," demanded the Adjutant's wife, resignedly, "what had Mrs. Halliday to do with it?"

"I don't know, except she's always very hospitable!"

"And gave you no lunch—" with a glance at the ravaged picnic before her. "But, tell me, what did you do at the Deanery?"

"Broke away as soon as I could, of course!"

"Leaving your car behind you?"

"Yes."

Here Mrs. Hallett leant back in her chair and sighed. Then she suddenly burst into a gush of helpless laughter, like a schoolgirl. Then, pulling herself together, she said, soberly, but with those

twinkles still about her eyes and mouth: "Mr. Somers, let us begin again. I'll have one of your cigarettes, please." She took it, lighted it, and then passed the ornate silver lighter (a wedding present) to her guest. "Now! You say Nora Wynne-Pritchard cut you when you were in your car. You say Miss Goosey says she didn't say a word (most unlike her!), you say, that leaves her parents. Now, try to tell me, in words of one syllable, just what the trouble is."

"Haven't I been trying to tell you?" returned Billy Somers, gazing appealingly at his hostess over the disordered table. "If, as they try to make out, I've been and proposed to two girls——"

Mrs. Hallett gave a little shriek. "What?"
—"in one evening——"

Mrs. Hallett threw up both her hands, and her cigarette landed on the mantelpiece.

"Wait a bit, wait a bit. Let me take that in, Mr. Somers. *You proposed to two girls in one evening?*"

"Ah, but I can't have!" he broke out again. "It's impossible, isn't it? Not to *two* girls, in *one* evening! *You* can see that, can't you, Mrs. Hallett? *How could I?*"

"Well, but did you?" She tapped her foot under the table. "Or didn't you?"

"They say I did!" declared Billy in mournful desperation.

"Who says so? And who are the girls?"

"Nora Wynne-Pritchard is one, of course. And Miss Goosey is the other," admitted the wretched Billy.

"Miss Goosey! The daughter of that truly terrible old man who goes to church and everywhere with a hunting—I mean 'unting—crop? The absurdly pretty child with blue eyes like this?" and she drew enormous circles with her finger in the air.

"D'you call her 'pretty'?" Billy said, gloomily, and continued: "I did propose to Nora Wynne-Pritchard, I know. I always meant to. But now Miss Goosey says I proposed to *her*!"

"And you say you didn't?"

"Rather not!"

"Well, but you must have said something that the girl took for a proposal. She looks indescribably silly," mused the Adjutant's wife. "I once knew a young man who said to a girl at a dance, '*What a pretty frock that is of yours!*' and she immediately cooed, '*Shall I tell people that we are engaged?*' It must have been something of that sort, Mr. Somers. What did you talk about, at the dance, to the Goosey girl?"

"Upon my word, I don't know," declared Billy. "What does one talk about? Blest if I can remember a single word I said to her. I couldn't even swear that I'd had a dance with her. I suppose I must have, but——"

There was a pause. The Adjutant's wife fixed the young subaltern very steadily with her shrewd brown eyes. Then she got up. With one hand she took up the whiskey decanter, in the other the siphon that had been standing in front of Mr. Somers' place. Deliberately she removed them to the further corner of the sideboard. Then she came back, sat down again, and said, nodding solemnly at him, "The best thing you could do, my young friend, would be to follow the old Colonel's lead and sign the pledge!"

Billy turned quickly upon her. "What! What! Dash it, you ought to know me better than that, Mrs. Hallett! Ask Jim. He knows that—well, simply nothing ever bowls me over. To begin with, I don't give it much chance. Secondly—well, it just *doesn't*. Some men are born with those heads. You ask Jim. . . . Do you think, do you actually think that I was drunk when I did it?"

"Well! 'Were you *sober* when you swore—'?"

"Of course I was!"

"What, when you proposed to these two girls?" said Mrs. Hallett, and regarding him doubtfully. "There must be something you're not telling me——"

"I've told you everything I know." Billy's honest eyes stared straight back at her.

"Then there must have been something you never noticed," retorted the Adjutant's wife. "It's aston-

ishing the things men can succeed in not noticing,—the power they have of not seeing what's under their noses. It amounts to a sixth sense, I think! You say Miss Goosey told her parents about this . . . affair? Have you seen them?"

"Seen *him*," said poor Billy.

"Well? What was he like about it?"

Beads of moisture broke out on Billy's brow at the memory. In imagination he saw himself back in the Deanery kitchen; he heard Mr. Goosey's robust voice holding forth about "brass buttons"; he saw him turn, fling that cigar into that cabbage bed, drop that hunting-crop with which he practised playing golf, and advance upon him, Billy, with both hands outstretched. . . .

Billy, sitting in the Adjutant's chair, half fell, limply, over the side of it. Then, picking himself up, he put his back into describing that scene to the sympathetic Mrs. Hallett.

"You see, he thinks I proposed to the girl, all right. She thinks so, right enough. I must have done something of the kind! And yet——"

Incredible as it sounded, Mrs. Hallett had no choice but to believe his story. Somehow this good-looking youngster before her had actually had the madness or the bad luck or the—something unexplained—on one evening to ask two girls to share his life. He'd asked for it! And one request he admitted: the other he denied.

Again she went over the possibilities of that dance with Miss Goosey. . . . Had there been any sort of flirtation, anything that could be construed into a flirtation?

But how could there have been? Billy demanded. Hadn't he just been accepted by Nora, the Only Girl in the World as far as he was concerned?

Mrs. Hallett knitted her brows over it.

"But of course that's why Nora cut you on the road this morning," she said, presently. "She's heard something about you and this other girl."

"It looks very much like it," said Nora's lover, gloomily regarding the smoke of his cigarette. "But who the dickens could she have heard it from?"

"If it had been true," pursued Mrs. Hallett, thoughtfully, "she would have been perfectly right to cut you, you know."

"Yes. Oh, yes!" agreed the young man.

Mrs. Hallett went on thinking aloud in the cigarette haze. "*And it's not a case of 'How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away,' as it so often, often is—*"

"Good Lord, no!" with a violent shake of Billy's head. "*I never dreamt of wanting the Goosey girl!*"

"What about *her*?" put in Mrs. Hallett, more sharply. "What about the girl's point of view? She evidently likes you, or she wouldn't have thought

of getting engaged to you." She looked at him again. "Did she kiss you?"

"No," fibbed Billy, in all decency, but colouring a rich pillar-box red as he did so; and the Adjutant's wife said, softly, "Poor little wretch of a girl!"

"Oh, er—why? She can't really care; she's only a kid," said Billy, deprecatingly. "But what about *me*, Mrs. Hallett? What am I to do next? Which of these girls am I to go to first? Her, I suppose; the Goosey?"

"That won't help you much with Nora."

"You do think I ought to go to Nora's first?"

"Yes. That would certainly be the best thing," decided Mrs. Hallett, nodding. "Tell her just what you've told me. Go at once. Tell her there's a ghastly mistake somewhere, and that appearances are against you, and throw yourself on her mercy. Go now. Then come and report to me. I'll help you in any way that I possibly can," promised his hostess, gravely.

Then, having been serious for five minutes, her face began to sparkle and twinkle once again.

"Really, Mr. Somers— No. After this scrape, I simply really can't go on calling you Mr. Somers. I shall have to call you Billy. Tell me just one more thing about it, Billy, will you?"

"Well?" said Billy, as he got up to go.

"I hope," said Mrs. Hallett, sedately, looking up

at him, "that there were *only* those two? I hope that you didn't propose to any *more* girls at that dance?"

"No. Oh, no. That's the lot. Two was quite enough, thank you!" said poor Billy; and left.

CHAPTER IX

WE will now leave Billy, happy in the belief that it was not more than two girls that he'd proposed to at the Loamshires' dance. Let us return for a moment to Lorne Halliday, the Dean's daughter, the third girl who had accepted the unknowing man.

My readers will quite understand that, on the morning after the event, Lorne must have told the first girl she knew—or have burst. Also, they will have guessed long ago that it was Lorne Halliday who had got Billy in disgrace with Nora, and not Lily Goosey (as Billy supposed).

Lorne had been so full of bewildered joy, the morning when she'd gone over to the Wynne-Pritchards to return the umbrella, that she simply had no eyes to see how Nora took the announcement she made. Nora represented an ear; an excuse to let Lorne hear herself voice her own extraordinary news.

"My dear, I must tell you," Lorne said all in a rush as the two girls stood in the garden. "What do you think? Last night at the dance somebody proposed to me. . . . Would you believe it? Mr. Somers! I am going to marry him. It's like a dream!"

For a moment the whole of the green garden seemed to swing round Nora.

Then she found words.

"Engaged! . . . You're engaged? Oh! I'm so glad! But—do tell me!"

"It was last night, Nora. Towards the end," Lorne told her, with far-away eyes. "I should have thought he thought I was much too bookish . . . not a bit his sort of girl. But we had a dance——"

"You mean you and—Mr. Somers?"

"Yes; and afterwards we—oh! When he said, '*How about our getting engaged——*'"

"Mr. Somers of the Loamshires?"

"Yes! . . . *Billy!*" added Lorne with a shy laugh. "I can hardly believe myself. You know I never thought anybody would ever care for me in *that* way; ever want to— And at first when he proposed——"

I have told you that Nora was half-Irish, and irascible. She seemed to flame up. She sparkled with delight—the delight of an iceberg that realises it is on its way to tropic seas.

"How *thrilling!*" she cried. "You must tell me all about it later, Lorne, dear. I simply can't wait now. . . . New kitchen-maid to see for Mother. . . . I know you'll forgive me; I must rush. . . ."

She rushed, like a hare, to her bedroom.

Try and picture the feelings of this hot-tempered, proud, and passionate little creature.

Last night she, Nora, had scarcely been able to sleep for happiness. This morning she had skipped blithely out of bed to greet her first day as an engaged girl. There need be no more pretending to herself that she didn't really care; a fair-haired conqueror with a masterly ring in his voice had compelled her to haul down her flag with a run—and what woman doesn't adore being “made” to do what she wants? All her life before that time was past, she was starting on a new phase of existence. The bathroom had rung with her carolling:

*“My heart, my heart is like a rainbow-shell
That swims upon a halcyon sea [splash]
Because the birthday of my life is come,
Because my love, my love has come to me!”*

She had dressed with shining eyes, glorying in her good looks because they were for him.

And now she had scarcely swallowed her breakfast when she was told her love, her love, had gone to somebody else. Sitting down with a bump on the edge of her white wicker chair, Nora tried to remember the exact words of what Lorne Halliday had said.

“Mr. Somers. Mr. Somers of the Loamshires.
Billy . . . !”

And she was awake. There was no doubt about it. Billy had proposed to Lorne Halliday. “Towards

the end" of the dance. Was that before, or after he'd proposed to her, Nora? After. She'd seen him dancing with Lorne, when she, Nora, was having a dance with Captain Hallett. *After* he'd proposed to her— But that wasn't the point. *On the same evening* that he proposed to her, he could make love to another girl. Nora flamed again. She clenched her little hands. "*Beast!*" she uttered aloud. She meant Billy.

On the same evening that he'd kissed her like that!—Why had she let him? She raged against herself. Why, why hadn't she done as she'd planned, and been Victorian, and insincere? Why *hadn't* she pretended she'd never thought of him? Then he would have thought more of her. Those ugly, cautious maxims, like "*Hold the bone and the dog will follow you,*" were not made up without any reason. The reason was to be found in men like Billy Somers.

"*Rotter!*" she muttered, hotly.

As she lifted her head, she caught sight of her own charming figure, reflected in the glass of her wardrobe and wearing the green stripey frock that she'd put on fresh that morning. She'd been so glad that it had just come home from the wash. Billy had once said it was pretty; like a bit of ribbon grass. She'd put it on, this morning, for him. . . .

Quite suddenly she sprang up and tore at the fasteners of it. Ppp-prip! they went half-way down

the front. Then, as suddenly, she stopped. Could there be any mistake?

No. Lorne's face . . . Lorne's voice, saying, "Mr. Somers . . . Mr. Somers of the Loamshires . . . *Billy!*" Lorne, that bookworm, was not the kind of girl who made things up.

"Prripp!" went the rest of the fasteners. Nora tossed the pretty frock onto the end of her bed, and put on the old mauve linen she'd worn yesterday afternoon.

With that dress she put a mantle of cold pride over the flaming fury of her heart. She flushed hotly for just one moment as she thought how awful it would have been if she'd burst out to Lorne: "But he's engaged to *me!* He proposed to *me!*"

And, thank goodness, she hadn't said a word to her father and mother. Nobody knew what had happened in that sitting-out corner at that dance last night, except herself and—this Mr. Somers of the Loamshires.

She would deal with him.

She would deal with him immediately.

She rang the bell.

Mary came in at once from "doing" the landing.

"If Mr. Somers comes and asks for me, *ever*, I am not at home. Or rings me up."

That made her feel a little better. Feeling better, she flung herself upon the bed, and burst into floods of tears.

Half an hour later, she had washed and powdered her face, and was sitting in front of her little writing-table, writing the following note:

"MY DEAR NELLIE:—

"May I propose myself to come and stay with you for a few days, as you so kindly asked me to, when you were in Ditchwater? I'm feeling so sick of this place, and I should so love a breath of the sea, if you would put up with me. Do let me know by return.

"Yours affectionately,

"NORA WYNNE-PRITCHARD."

The envelope was addressed to:

"MRS.

"SEAVIEW,

This letter was the cause of a telegram in reply, and also of another letter.

The telegram was for Miss Wynne-Pritchard.

It ran:

"Delighted to have you at once wire train and will meet much love

NELLIE."

The letter was not for Miss Wynne-Pritchard. The last part of it ran:

" You gave up too soon, I think. If a girl doesn't mean a man to propose again, she doesn't do this kind of thing. I should have another go, my dear boy. You ought to be able to wrangle some leave and come straight on to us. I'll keep her here as long as poss. Cheery-ho!

" Your affec. sister,

" NELL."

It was addressed to:

" Captain Hunter,

" The Barracks,

" Ditchwater."

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CHAPTER X

THAT afternoon Nora Wynne-Pritchard manufactured that headache which prevented her coming down to tea when Mr. Somers of the Loamshires called at the White House.

You already know Billy's side of that visit (see page 25) and how he sat and sat there in the drawing room, wondering if she would never come. We will now regard it from the point of view of Nora, who sat and sat there in her bedroom, wondering if he would never go. The girl was in three moods at once. Deep down, stifled in her heart, was the agony that had found just a little relief in tears, that morning. Above that was her raging anger, and above that the cold pride, trimmed with flippancy.

She had seen Billy coming up the path after lunch, and had dashed into the house by the side way. He'd come . . . ! What for? Probably to behave as if absolutely nothing had happened last night, thought Nora in her room: the best way to cover the tracks of a flirtation. Let him do what he liked. She hoped that at least he wouldn't stay long. She could hear the sound of his deep young voice rumbling up to her through the ceiling. The voice that had declared so masterfully: "I've been mad about you

ever since I came to this place . . . now I want to know what you mean; yes or no?"

If only she hadn't seemed to take it seriously!

Rotter! . . .

On and on he stayed.

Nora drank the tea that was brought up to her on a little tray; and began to tell herself that she really didn't care about anything now, only it was unspeakable of any young man to pay such an unconscionably long call. Keeping her penned in her room like this! She glanced at her little clock. Six o'clock! What was he doing? Why didn't he go, the brute? Or did he mean to divide his time between these two houses? Lunch with the Hallidays, perhaps, tea with the Wynne-Pritchards?

She took up the half-sheet of note paper on which she had jotted down a list of things she'd have to get to-morrow before she packed up to go away and stay with Nellie:

"Oatmeal.

Scientific hair-pins.

See if shoes ready."

(Still his voice rumbled on.)

"New toothbrush.

Cigarettes that N. likes——"

How Father and Mother could stand that young man she didn't know. And to think that she, Nora,

had ever thought she *liked* him! To think that last night she had so lost her head over him! She had said "yes" to his make-believe proposal. She had let him kiss her; the first man who'd ever done so!—well, she hoped he'd be the last. He should be. How she hated men! How she— Ah! He was off at last, was he? The drawing-room door opened. Her own bedroom door was a little ajar, as it happened. She heard the voice of the departing guest. "And I do hope the headache will be better——"

How dared he? What had her headaches to do with him?

She didn't care if she never saw another man again as long as she lived! . . .

As soon as she turned from the window whence she'd seen the last glimpse of Billy's straight back going out of their gate, she went downstairs to the drawing room.

There, standing by the French window, she found her father and mother in rather an unexpected attitude. The Major's arm was round his wife's waist, and her pretty grey head was buried on his shoulder. Sweethearts again, they hadn't heard her come in.

They turned; and Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard with a little cry ran across the room to her daughter.

"Nora! Ah, Nora, darling!" was all she said as she put her arms round her neck.

Then, suddenly, and with dismay, Nora realised what all those rumblings this afternoon had been

about. Billy Somers had been talking about her, and himself, to her people!

At the same time her father strode across the room, clearing his throat and saying, "Well, my little girl——"

Horrors! They were both beaming fondly upon her! She found herself about to be involved in a sentimental scene; the last thing in the world that she could bear, at that moment! She held herself as woodenly as she could. Speaking in a tone as businesslike as she could assume, she said, "I say, Father, could you let me have five pounds, please?"

Major Wynne-Pritchard looked at her, rather blankly. He hadn't expected that money would be the first thing that his little girl would ask for, just at this moment, at this moment! He remembered his own courtship—which seemed rather different, but very near, this afternoon. That fine youngster who was so much in love with his little girl had awakened very tender memories for himself and that little girl's mother. The light of twenty years ago misted his eyes as they looked at the dark-haired, erect, little figure before him in the crumpled mauve gown. Perhaps the child was shy. . . .

Gravely and fondly her father regarded her.

"Is that all, Nora?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you, Father. That will do for now," she answered, in a hard, casual tone. "If I wanted any more I could write for it. Or wire."

Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard, with one arm still about her daughter, looked at her softly and reproachfully.

"Ah, darling; sure you know that wasn't all that Father meant, at all. Haven't you something else to tell us?"

For a moment the miserable little Nora wished to Heaven that she had. Then she hardened her heart again. She pulled that flippancy-trimmed mantle of pride well about her. It was the only way to keep from breaking down.

"What else should I have, Mother? What do you want me to say?"

"We want nothing but your happiness, dear."

"Then, Mother," said Nora, a little sharply, "I shall be awfully unhappy if you don't let me go away to-morrow. That's what I want the money for."

"To go *away*?" echoed Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard, her sweet Irish voice rising in astonishment. "Now? Just now, of all times?" She glanced at her husband, who was biting the end of his grey moustache in surprise. Then she took one of the girl's hands in hers. "Ah, then, it's no use pretending, darling," she said, quiveringly but smilingly. "Hasn't Billy Somers been here telling us all about it? . . . and we're so—so happy. . . ."

Nora would have given anything to snatch away her hands, roughly. It was quite roughly that she asked, "What has Mr. Somers been saying?" Her

mother took away one hand, to put it on Major Wynne-Pritchard's arm. He drew a little closer to her, as if guessing her need for help here; the child was cold and hard only because of her shyness, but is there anything more chilling to the affection of middle-age than the diamond-hardness of youth?

"Don't shut us out, honey, Father and me. We understand!" the mother pleaded. "Don't pretend you don't know. He was so sweet to us; he told us how he wants to marry you, and that you said 'Yes.'"

This, of course, was the truth. But was Nora, wrapping herself in this cloak that was to cover all she felt, going to admit the truth? In this mood it made no difference to her whatsoever that Billy Somers had not, after all, come to cover up the tracks of a flirtation with her, and that it was apparently Lorne with whom he had been trifling. *The rotter!* After she had accepted him. . . . She drew her other hand out of her mother's. She gave a little laugh. Remember; she was very bitterly hurt.

"Said 'Yes'? He said I said 'Yes' to him? Oh, there he's very much mistaken!"

The elder Wynne-Pritchard exchanged a quick look at this.

"Mistaken—? But, Nora! He seemed quite sure!" Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard exclaimed in amazement. "He looked so happy! Didn't he?" turning

to her husband, who nodded and bit his moustache again.

Nora smiled—in a way. She said, “It takes *two* happy people to make an engagement, Mother.”

At this her parents exchanged another glance; a reassured one. They broke into a smile that meant they saw it all. A tiff already?

“Why, we didn’t know you’d seen him this morning, silly childie,” said her mother, patting her arm. “If you’ve had some little quarrel with Billy (and so of course that’s why you wouldn’t come down) well, these things very soon blow over again; very soon.” She quoted softly from the poet of her girlhood:

“ ‘ *And blessing on the falling-out
That all the more endears
When we fall out with those we love
And kiss again——’ ”*

“Don’t, Mother!” burst out Nora; and stamped her foot. Then, ashamed of herself, she said, quickly: “I’m sorry. But I haven’t seen Mr. Somers to-day. And you’re quite wrong. I haven’t had any quarrel at all with him. Why should I? I know,” she added, holding her little head well up, “I know that one isn’t supposed to say anything about the proposals one doesn’t accept. But Mr. Somers did propose to me at the dance last night, and—and I’d like to go away to-morrow.” There was a pause

of consternation in the pretty room that had so lately been the scene of a young man's acceptance by the parents of the girl he wanted to marry. He'd said— But the girl said something so different, now!

Major Wynne-Pritchard, clearing his throat, turned a perturbed face from his daughter to his wife. The "vagaries" of the women-folk of a household were ever Greek to the simple-minded soldier; this time they seemed not able to follow them, themselves.

Resigned, he enquired of Nora's mother, "Where does she want to go?"

"Where," asked Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard, tremulously, "do you want to go to, dear?"

Nora told them.

"H'm. Who are they?" asked the Major.

"Oh, you know, Hugh," said his wife, quickly. "You've heard Nora speak of that girl she was at school with; she's older than Nora; married somebody well-off. She's the sister of the M.O., here; that good-looking Captain Hunter."

"Oh; well, I suppose it's all right," said Major Wynne-Pritchard, looking worried. "R.A.M.C. people, eh? We always used to say 'Rather-a-Mixed-Crew.' However." He cleared his throat again. "What time are we supposed to be having dinner to-night?"

The family conclave was at an end.

CHAPTER XI

HAVING left our heroine (or rather one of our heroines) in a state of angry unhappiness, we will return to our hero, whom we also left in a far from joyous condition.

Let me see, he was about to set out hot-foot for Nora's house, there to lay all his troubles before the lady of his heart, to explain, to find out exactly where he, Billy Somers, stood.

Frustration again!

Frustration in the shape of an orderly who darted out upon him just as he passed the barracks gates, and informed him that the Colonel wished to see Mr. Somers at once.

What the Colonel wanted with Billy was to bestow upon him the job of Acting Adjutant for two days. Hallett, it appeared, had some private business, to do with a lawsuit, which took him to town at once. The Colonel of the Loamshires, who was a thin, white-haired, eager, old gentleman (very much like the White Knight in *Alice in Wonderland*), happened to be extremely fond of his schoolboyish-looking subaltern.

You will say that forcing upon him two days' extra work of an irritating, sedentary, and nig-

gling character was scarcely a mark of affection. Different people have different ways of showing their regard. The Colonel was determined to give the boy, whenever occasion arose, a chance to show what he was fit for.

"You had better sit down here at once, Somers," he said, in his characteristic ladylike politeness that covered a passion for discipline and efficiency, "and get along with this, please."

He left Billy in the Adjutant's room, sitting in front of "this"; which was an indigestible mass comprising returns, states, medical boards, Mess books, and War office memoranda.

Billy Somers, athlete and sportsman, had that naturally "tidying" mind which is actually a masculine, rather than a feminine attribute, in spite of all that is said to the contrary. There he sat, in the Adjutant's office, with papers under his hands, arranging and sorting them into order faster than the blue June afternoon was passing outside the window.

On the parade ground he heard the old familiar tramp of feet going by. A bugle call was snapped out once in a while. Presently he found himself with just enough leisure to begin cursing his luck again, and to begin meditating on the happenings of that doleful day.

To begin with, there was that dead cut from Nora, which seemed almost worse, now, than it had actually at the time.

Then there was that nightmare interview in the Gooseys' garden, when the girl Lily, after kissing him, had informed him that he had proposed to her at the dance.

Then there was the encounter at the Deanery with Papa Goosey; then his lunch at Mrs. Hallett's. . . .

"I wonder what she could do to help me? She ought to do something. That's what women are there for. She's safely married herself," thought Billy, a little fretfully. "I wonder if I had better send an orderly up now with a note to the Wynne-Pritchards? Good idea . . ." He drew a sheet of note paper towards him and began:

"MY DEAREST NORA:—

"I want to know what on earth you meant by that extraordinary behaviour to me in Love Lane this morning? What on earth have I done, and why on earth couldn't you have told me at the time? I have been coming up to see you about it, but the Colonel fired some work onto me instead. I shall come up to-night after dinner. We have got to have it out. Whatever I have done, I should hardly have deserved——"

Here, after a quick tap at the door, there entered the sleek black head and the rather Spanish good looks of Hunter, the M.O.

"Hullo, William! You here?" he exclaimed in a

friendly way, which still did not sit very easily upon him. "What's this?"

"Doing Adjutant for a couple of days," Billy explained, curtly. "Hallett's going away."

"Ah! I've got a few days, too," said the other young man, airily. "Going down to my sister's at Cowry Bay, in Wales. I think the sea air will do me good after so much overwork. By the way," he added, glancing at the fair head that was again bent over the writing-table, "I think my sister is having a friend of yours staying there, too."

"Oh," said Billy, indifferently.

"Yes," said Captain Hunter, with equal indifference, as he swung out of the door again, tossing over his shoulder the name of his sister's other guest, "Miss Wynne-Pritchard's off there, too."

As the door closed behind this bringer of ill-tidings, it left Billy dumfounded.

Going away? His own girl was going away without a word to him?

Without seeing him again?

He tore up the unfinished note and threw the tiny square pieces into the waste-paper basket.

Then he took another piece of paper and wrote another note with more indignation breathing through every line of it. Still he was not pleased with it. He began it again, and then again.

He was just in the middle of the sentence, "*I am entirely at a loss to understand,*" when the clerk

came in with a note for him—which was destined to put all thought of his own note out of his head for some time. It was written in the small, clear, “characteristic” handwriting which is affected by so many college-educated girls; it was addressed from The Deanery, and it said:

“DEAR MR. SOMERS:—

“I expect it is not necessary to explain to you the reason for this note.

“I am not reproaching you for not having seen me or said a word after what you did say, at the dance. If a mistake has been made I am sure it is better for both of us to recognise it, as you evidently have already. It is better to recognise it now than after we were married. Therefore, if it is a release from your engagement to me that you wish, please take this note as releasing you.

“Yours sincerely,

“LORNE HALLIDAY.

“P.S.—I think I told you that I had spoken of it to Father and Mother, but the only other person to whom I breathed a word about it was—Nora Wynne-Pritchard. I told her, the morning after, that we were engaged, and of course I would let her know that it is broken off.”

Half an hour later, the perplexed Billy was still staring at this note, and remembering Mrs. Hallett's

laughing words, "You are sure there are only *two* of them?"

And it was fully ten minutes later than that, by the office clock, that the wretched young man collected strength enough even to murmur feebly to himself one word: "Three!"

There was only one thing for Billy to do, to rush straight off to see Mrs. Hallett again.

In the little ramshackle villa, which the Halletts had "taken furnished" (and which, though it had a number of quite nice wedding presents of their own about it, always told tales of their being equally well-bred and hard-up), Billy passed a packed port-manteau in the hall.

And he found Mrs. Hallett finishing tea in the little drawing room, with Jim Hallett, all ready for departure.

The Adjutant's wife looked up as the maid announced Billy. "Hullo! here's the Mormon!" she cried, cheerfully. "Well! Do tell us. What did Miss Wynne-Pritchard have to say to you?"

Billy's reply was to slap down on the table, among all the tea-things, the letter he had just got. Then he strode across the little room again, and stood with his back to his hosts, gazing into the fern-filled summer fireplace.

"Am I to read this?" asked Mrs. Hallett's voice behind him.

"Of course you are to read it," said Billy without turning. "Hallett, too, if he likes."

He heard the quick rustle of Lorne's note being turned over; then Mrs. Hallett's loud gasp.

"But that makes three!" she cried, aghast.

Billy, still standing over the fireplace, groaned aloud.

"One, two, three," continued Mrs. Hallett, evidently counting on her pretty fingers. "And I asked you, when you were here, if there were *more* than two!"

"Yes, you did," said Billy, shortly; "don't rub it in!"

"Three? It reminds me of that song:

*"Three Women to every Man;
Say, girls, say, if you can,
Why can't every man have three wives?"*

That's evidently what you think, Henry the Eighth!"

Billy tapped with his foot against the fender.

"Bluebeard!" took up the lady's voice.

Billy kicked the poker.

"Sultan!" Mrs. Hallett purred.

Here Billy swung fiercely round.

"I asked you not to rub it in," he said, savagely.

"If I am boring you, I'll go."

Mrs. Hallett, he saw, looked anything but bored.

Keen zest in the seduction lighted up her face. Opposite to her, Jim Hallett was making a half-hearted effort to conceal his own enjoyment. Billy noticed the quick glance between the two, and then Hallett, still laughing, said, "This explains it."

"Explains what?" demanded Billy Somers.

"Well, it would be much nicer for the girl to have some one she knows to travel up with her," continued his friend, ignoring Billy as if he were a naughty little boy who had been stood in the corner. "I shall just put her into a taxi at the other end."

Billy, trying his best to keep his temper, turned to Mrs. Hallett: "Will you please tell me what explains what?"

"Only Miss Halliday is going up to town," said his hostess. "She is going to-night, and the Dean rang up to ask if Jim would travel with her. She is taking a post, he says. Secretarial work of some kind in London."

"Going? She's going too?" Billy exclaimed.

"Too?" said Mrs. Hallett. "Who else is going?"

Very gloomily Billy replied, "Miss Wynne-Pritchard's gone as well."

"Then," sympathised Mrs. Hallett, "you have only got one-third of a *fiancée* left in Ditchwater? Poor, lonely heart!"

Here the Adjutant interposed, putting down his teacup. "Look here, Somers. What is this lunatic

story about you that my wife tells me? Yesterday you told me you were engaged to be married. I congratulated you. Dash it all, I didn't know you had let yourself in for it neck and crop like this, and that you'd started a Great Salt Lake City scandal in——"

Billy looked dangerous. "I didn't come here to be rotted about it," he grunted. "You don't suppose I let myself into this for fun, do you?"

"What for then; a bet? '*That I become engaged to three girls at once on the night of our dance*'? Funny kind of bet to make, isn't it?"

"It wasn't a bet, you ape. It is ghastly serious. It's driving me mad, I can tell you. All day I have been thinking I must wake up in a minute from——"

"Love's young nightmare," murmured Mrs. Hallett.

The Adjutant demanded, bluntly, "Why don't you own up and say you were blottoh?"

"Because I jolly well wasn't," Billy retorted.

"You don't suggest that *they* were, I hope—the ladies?"

"One of them must be absolutely mad. That Goosey kid! And now this other one," said Billy, waving his hand at the letter, "seems to have got some sort of a touch of sun. She 'releases' me, does she? Suffering Henry! Look here, Hallett——"

But the Adjutant was looking at his watch as he rose.

"Time's up, my boy. I must push off now, much as I hate to tear myself away from this recital of your romance—romances, I mean. Anyhow, here's extraordinary good luck! Good-bye, old thing," with a nod and a glance at his wife. (The Halletts were still far too much in love to be able to bring themselves to kiss in public.) She only gave him a little smile as he went out. Not very far away from the house, by the way, he must have met that which was about to descend on his wife and Billy. . . .

As the garden gate clicked behind him, Billy turned to his hostess.

"Well, I don't want to be rude, Mrs. Hallett," he said, "but I'm glad that your husband has taken away that awful grin of his at last. Now, will you please be serious, like you were before Jim talked to you?"

Mrs. Hallett was humming softly and sweetly to herself the ancient ditty:

*"King Solomon and King David led rather merry
lives,*

*They'd each three hundred fiancées, and twice
three hundred wives——"*

"Damn!" broke very softly from the infuriated Billy. "Sorry——"

"Do you mean you are sorry you joined the wrong Service, Billy? Of course if you had been in the

Navy, it would not seem so *outré* your having one wife per port, but——”

Billy reached for his hat.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you with my affairs, Mrs. Hallett,” he said, stiffly. “I think I will go now. Could I post any letters for you?”

He reached the hall.

But hardly had he opened the outer door, when he closed it again softly and fearfully. He fell back into the drawing room again as if borne down by an advancing enemy army corps.

Mrs. Hallett, after one glance at him, dashed to the drawing-room window.

Advancing up the path, she beheld Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song” embodied in an extremely pretty girl; yes, flapper in a white frock and with her lemon-yellow curls, with blue ribbons all a-flutter about her, and with a smile that seemed about to crease into permanent Marcel curves her innocent pink face.

“She’s coming in here,” uttered Billy, hoarsely. “What the— I say! You must let me get out the back way!”

One bound, and he’d flung open the window at the other end of the drawing room, stepping out of it and into the back garden just as “Miss Goosey!” was announced.

Just in time he bolted, tiptoeing past the scullery window and out to the gate. As he cleared the corner

of the house, the high-pitched, gushing, girlish voice floated out to him on the summer air. These were the words he caught: "Oh, no! I haven't told *everybody yet*, Mrs. Hallett! Only just a few friends!"

CHAPTER XII

BY the S.P.C.A. horse trough at the bottom of the Halletts' road, the hunted Billy met a small white motor car being driven slowly and erratically towards him.

The Hallidays' gardener, in his own, his forgotten Banshee! "By Jove! My car! Yes! good. The very thing I wanted. Thanks," said Billy, pressing a shilling into the man's hand.

If anything was clear in this muddle of his mind, it was that he ought to see the Wynne-Pritchards at once.

But when he got up to the White House and sat down in the dining room, with its praying-rugs and its Benares brass that gave it such an Anglo-Indian hallmark, he did not find much counsel; no, not in that room where he had been made (and was still made) to feel as "one of the family."

Major Wynne-Pritchard, looking worried, wrung the young man's hand, heartily and sympathetically. Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard's pretty Irish eyes (Nora's eyes!) bore traces of tears.

"Will you ever forgive me, Billy, for not having written, after I promised to, and all?" she said, ruefully. "Sure if there's one thing that's difficult to

me, it's sitting down and saying all there is to say in a letter; especially when there is nothing to say!"

"No doubt, Somers, you know more about all this than we do ourselves," added the Major, biting that hard-worked moustache, while his wife went on murmuring that she was sure it must come right again presently. He glanced out of the window. "You've got your car, you know. Why not get a day and nip down to this place in Wales and see Nora yourself? It's no good writing to a woman," pronounced Nora's father. "They never take any notice of what you've put; only what they choose to read between the lines, and that's Hades. Why not go to-morrow?"

Billy explained about his new work.

"M'm. Well; give her time to come to her senses," muttered her father. "Irish, Irish! Always the trouble——"

"Thank you!" flashed from his wife. The Major went on with his hand on her arm. "Only one man who ever knew how to govern them—Cromwell, his name was. Look at the Cabinet now!"—For these were the days when the possibility of Civil War was being discussed all over these islands. "As for Nora, it's just her Irish impulsiveness, mixed, perhaps, with the Welsh temper that boiled up like milk if you neglect it for a moment. I don't see what else the trouble can be."

Nora's lover, with a set face, informed Nora's

father that he, Billy, unfortunately did know what the trouble was.

"Only I shall have to see Nora about it myself, sir, before I'm able to say anything else to you. Yes; it's a good idea, that of running down to see her in the car as soon as I can get off. I won't write. I'll leave it until Hallett gets back on Monday."

"Perhaps we shall have heard from her to-morrow morning. Or perhaps you will," suggested Nora's mother, glancing up at the big young man whom she regarded as an ally. "Do come up again to-morrow, won't you?"

Billy did go up to the White House again on the following day, the house that was Nora's home, and that whispered to him of Nora from every cushion and picture and chair. In every corner of it he saw in imagination the graceful figure, the mutinous face. And, oh, how he hungered for a real sight of them. . . .

Little did he imagine that even as he and Nora's parents were exchanging dispirited "*No! No new*"es, the following little scene was being enacted not a hundred miles away.

The scene was set on the sands of Cowry Bay; a broad golden stretch between the sea and the purple jigsaw of the distant mountains. In the midday haze the bathing tents looked a cluster of striped Shirley poppies, and the children that played about among

them were a crop of moving buttercups and daisies.

Nora Wynne-Pritchard, in a pink linen frock that suited her to perfection, was walking slowly along by the margin of the waves; beside her, in flannels, walked Captain Hunter, the M.O.

A glorious summer day; a becoming summer frock; firm golden sands to walk on; a darkly handsome young man, obviously attracted, to walk by one's side; and what more could the heart of any girl desire?

"Nothing, nothing, nothing!" insisted Nora to her own heart that quivered in every fibre for the sight of the recreant Billy and for the sound of his boyishly masterful voice with its direct, unsophisticated speech.

Certainly he was not as good-looking as her friend Nellie's brother, Captain Hunter. *Not* as clever. . . .

Captain Hunter was talking to her as they walked along; saying things about Love being the One Game in the world that was worth while, and how he wondered whether he would ever be allowed to take a hand in it himself, or whether he was doomed to be a looker-on for the rest of the chapter— He also had something to say about how no woman had seemed to care much about him since his mother had died and left him as a little chap. There was Nellie, of course. She was a good sort. But, after all, a

sister's affection was hardly—and so on. For Captain Hunter was the type of young man who talks in unfinished sentences, punctuated by a dark-eyed glance. Men generally loathed him at sight, and women had a vague feeling that they *ought* to loathe too—which is partly why that type of man is fairly popular with women, or so Mrs. Hallett, the Adjutant's wife, told me. This type has the rare gift of knowing when a woman wants attention and when she genuinely longs to be left alone with a cup of tea. The man who knows this and acts on it can marry anybody; after marriage he talks feelingly of "My wife; the best little woman in the world—God, how she bores me!"

Captain Hunter's instinct showed him Nora yearning at this moment for attention; though not the real reason for that yearning. He therefore created an atmosphere of "attention" that simmered about her as ceaselessly as the heat haze danced upon the sky line, and Nora began to hope, quite disgracefully, that all this was going to lead up to another proposal.

It's a pity, as Mrs. Hallett said, that the good gifts of tuition and perceptiveness in life are generally bestowed upon the man whom men call a Rotter!

At that precise psychological moment Captain Hunter's dark eyes perceived his chance and he took it. Dramatically breaking off one of the soft, un-

finished sentences, he turned to her and said in a hard voice: "What is the use of going on talking like this? You told me long ago, before the dance, that there was absolutely no hope. But a man very badly in love finds it hard to—to get accustomed to that."

"I—was very sorry," murmured Nora, feeling culpably triumphant. Remember how she had been hurt. And every girl knows that there's only one sovereign balm for the torn heart of a girl who has been badly "let down" by the man she loves, and that this sovereign balm is the homage of another. It hardly matters who he is, provided that he's presentable. All she wants is this flag of bravado to wave under the nose of the first young man.

Of course, in her pique and rage and heartbreak Nora did not admit this frankly to herself. Girls seldom can admit things really frankly to themselves; it's the way they've been brought up. Generations of this careful upbringing prompted Nora to tell herself that she liked Captain Hunter much better than she thought she did before she had stayed a couple of days with him at his sister's, her old schoolfellow's, house.

Captain Hunter began to sound the note of "Perhaps—after all—if you knew me a little better still——"

While he is doing so we can take a quick look at these people in whose bungalow Nora was staying at

this seaside place (while Billy was pining for her in the midst of his Ditchwater complications).

Mr. Milbanke, her host, was a retired stock-broker; a small, fat, bald-headed man, very kind and absolutely under the thumb of his wife, who presented cheques to him with a carelessly good-natured "Sign, please." He had married this Miss Nellie Hunter because he imagined that she was what he called "smart."

She had been, as a matter of fact, one of these countless suburban girls who hang on to the fringes of a theatrical set; an ardent first-nighter, she adored stage gossip, and she copied (some of) Miss Teddie Gerard's frocks. She, young Mrs. Milbanke, could always tell you which was the liqueur to drink just now, and which was the particular brand of cigarettes which you must order. On the strength of her brother the M.O. she posed as belonging to a Service family; she was full of poses as well as of little gags and of the slang of the instant; but she could be amusing and she was good-humoured. This good-humour and gaiety of hers were a welcome relief to her guest, Nora, who craved for anything that might help her to forget.

Captain Hunter, otherwise intuitive, did not guess at this craving.

He congratulated himself, as he walked a little closer to Nora, on the fact that young Somers' nose had been put out of joint by his (Hunter's) su-

perior charm. There had been no need to queer the fellow with the Colonel (which hadn't come off in spite of that doped drink). Here was the girl who had refused him (Hunter) a fortnight ago, listening with downcast eyes to his second proposal, and in no hurry to cut him short, as she'd done the time before.

Only she said: "I—I can't give you a definite answer just this minute. If you could let me have a little time——"

"A little," said Hunter, tenderly. "Not too much, Nora."

They had passed into the shadow of a rock that pushed a big protecting shoulder between the couple and the groups by the bathing tents. He took her hand, bent his dark head to look into her eyes. It was Nora's first experience of that every-day tragedy "The Wrong Man in the Right Place." She wrenched her hand away, trying with that gesture to shut out the thought of Billy's shining, fair head and the long arm he had wound about her at the dance. She reminded herself that Captain Hunter was worth ten of a man who could make love to two girls within an hour. . . . She wished devoutly that Providence had so arranged that it were possible to fall in love as you liked, and with whom you liked. Oh, the difference it would make in the life of a girl! Couldn't one *try*?

She said, flutteringly, "I don't want to say any-

thing more about this, Captain Hunter, yet——”

“Of course not,” he agreed, secretly delighted at the “yet.”

“Don’t say anything to the Milbankes, please,” she said, “or to my people. I want to think. . . . Let us go in to lunch, shall we?”

CHAPTER XIII

NOW for another quick change of scene. Let us leave Cowry Bay, that anglicised Welsh watering place, and return to the dépôt of the Loamshires at Ditchwater.

Now, it was hardly to be expected that, since Lily Goosey had told a "few friends" of her engagement to Mr. Billy Somers, the news would not have been all over the place within twenty-four hours.

Any one who has lived in a provincial town can imagine the wild buzz of interest that spread immediately.

An engagement is everybody's business, just as a funeral is. (Or more so, for we must all die—some day, but it isn't certain that we shall all become engaged.)

"Have you heard the news about young Somers?" . . . "Haven't you really?" . . . "Why, that he is going to marry the Goosey girl!" "Impossible. I always thought it was to be Major Wynne-Pritchard's daughter." . . . "Who told you?" . . . "Why, I had it from Mrs. Hume. She said the girl herself told her, and that she was 'only telling a few friends.'" "But the young man was up here playing tennis yesterday. He never said anything. He

didn't look— Is one supposed to congratulate, or is one not?"

At the Deanery the news was received in silence; and very bitter were the thoughts of the Dean and his wife on the young man whom they had been prepared to welcome as Lorne's lover. At the White House, the reception of the news by the Wynne-Pritchards led to some confusion, for it was contradicted flatly by the Major as a piece of "garrison gossip," with the added comment that he could tell them on the best authority that it was untrue.

To him and to his wife the "rumour" shed some light (not much!) on Nora's behaviour. Hasty, high-spirited, she had been made jealous by Ditchwater tittle-tattle about young Somers and a girl——

Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard could be certain of one thing, that Billy had never looked at the girl. She, Nora's mother, went about steadily contradicting the "tittle-tattle" which the innocent Lily had herself spread.

People simply didn't know what to believe. . . .

And the whole affair would have been a great deal more than a nine days' wonder in Ditchwater had it not been for another piece of news that intervened.

This was news that swamped completely and as it seemed forever not only ordinary engagements, not only Billy's triple one, but every selfish and private

and personal concern of every man and every woman in every land where we fly the British flag.

With what came upon many people with a startling suddenness: war was declared.

Nine out of every ten soldiers in England received their orders. People thanked God that the Army was fit and ready to the last man, not dreaming what a drop in the bucket that little Army was to become.

We hear enough nowadays of the glorious exploits of this unit or that; "New Army" to a man. Their names need not be repeated here, their names, which five years ago were unminted words, are household words to-day.

But, in our pride of these new divisions, we do not forget what must remain our greatest pride of all, that little old handful, trained to the minute; the men of Mons and Le Cateau. The men who saved not only Paris, not only France, not only England—the old, "hide-bound" Regulars!

Hats off!

However, this little story does not touch these great happenings. It aims only at following some happenings that were proceeding at that same tremendous time; little happenings that still went on, like the dance of a midge under the trees during some terrible storm. Here follows the effect of the universal thunderclap upon Mr. Somers of the

Loamshires and upon his curiously multiple engagements.

In the first place, Billy was the tenth man whose orders were to stay at home while he himself was chafing his bit to be off.

When his Colonel sent for him, it was with real sympathy that he broke the bad news to the boy; covering his real rage and exasperation in his usual lady-like voice.

"The Brigade is going up," said the White Knight of a Colonel, "and there are some sweeping changes, Somers. But you and I are to sit tight here."

"We're to stay on, sir?" said Billy. (All of him but his body was already in France.) "What's the meaning of that?"

"War Office again, I suppose," said the Colonel with fatalistic mildness.

"But—what is there to do here, sir?"

"We've got to see this place turned into a training dépôt; one of the biggest. The recruiting stations will be sending 'em along presently."

And so drafts began to appear in Loamshire.

Drafts of the motliest, drafts in shirt sleeves and bowler hats, in cloth caps, corduroy trousers, hob-nail boots, cycling shoes, and luxurious footwear that had done the winter sports in Switzerland. Drafts drilled on the parade ground, clad in what Billy described as "Mother's dressing gown." Uniform was not for many weeks forthcoming. It took

the combined efforts of the Colonel and Billy and the Quartermaster even to feed the men in those first weeks.

Ditchwater became, with countless other villages and towns, a place transformed. It was no longer the quiet cathedral town, barely enlivened by the soldiers. No; it became a small sketch for Aldershot or Borden.

Love Lane was chockablock with G.S. wagons, lorries, carts. The dust of them turned the hedges white as lime, white as the tents that spread the fields with avenues of cones. From morning till night Billy was as busy as twenty, doing what every regular officer was suddenly called upon to do in those days, namely, the work that should have been in hand years and years before.

From reveille until long after tattoo he drilled, organised, wrote, and even forgot his private affairs.

It was a surprise to him one day when, going into his quarters, he found a registered packet addressed to him. It had been overlooked, and his servant had stuck it up, to catch his eye, on the top of his clamped-together brushes.

He opened it.

Three little green leather cases met his eyes. He opened the first case.

It contained a pearl and emerald half-hoop engagement ring from Glitters, the London jewellers.

"Oh—Lord!" he muttered, suddenly flung back weeks. . . . He'd sent for it, of course, the day after that fatal dance. He'd wired for a selection—for Nora!

The other two cases contained a marquise opal ring set in brilliants, and a ruby circlet. Three rings. Billy stared at them. He was still staring when the "officer's call" snapped out and he shoved the things into the drawer of his little dressing table and turned the key, and then he forgot all about them once again.

His job claimed him, a big enough job, even if it was not that Big Job for which Billy's soul hungered and thirsted. He was grateful, when he remembered, for every wrangle with defaulting contractors, for every tussle over the telephone, and for the days of wild confusion before the Ditchwater post-office staff was doubled. Such things as love affairs stood aside, and their standing aside was taken for granted. Petticoats had vanished out of a world of khaki and puttees. He had scarcely seen a woman to speak to during these first days of August, Nineteen-Fourteen. Not Mrs. Hallett, who was busily packing up in the little house which could no longer be home to her, since Jim was off! not the Dean's wife, not Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard, not the Goosey girl. . . .

Billy had heard from his batman that Mr. Goosey was putting The Retreat at the service of his coun-

try; the double fireplaced hall was an officers' Mess now.

He also heard that at the Deanery a large Y.M.C.A. marquee had been put up on the lawn under the cedars; and that Major Wynne-Pritchard had gone off to London to interview the War Office about his own chance of a job. All these people weren't much more to him at the moment than people he had read about in a book.

Then something happened that suddenly made all those people real enough once more, and that brought back the past with a rush, blotting out the unfortunate present.

With his papers one morning there arrived a polite note from Glitters the jewellers' to enquire about the three rings which had been sent down on approval to Mr. Somers' esteemed order.

"By Jove, yes; I must send those confounded things back at once," thought Billy.

His friend, Mrs. Hallett, had once said that men have what amounts to "a special gift" for forgetting anything that requires to be sent off then and there by post. Billy forgot all about those rings again.

Another week passed. Then Billy actually got a lawyer's letter about them.

"Oh, devil take the things! I'll post 'em now," he told himself, and he packed them up once more.

He didn't let himself dwell on the thought that he ought to have been sending back two rings only.

Nora—of whom there was still no news—should have chosen one. Would she have taken the emeralds, her own Irish colour? . . .

But never mind that! He stuffed the little read-dressed packet into his pocket and swung out of barracks, out of the square, and into the August glare of Love Lane.

Here Fate had prepared for him a very nasty jar; rather, a series of them.

A block of ration carts filled the Lane; the young man was held up by it. So was somebody else, coming from the opposite direction. For a second Billy thought his eyes had deceived him. He looked again; ah, it was she, all right. She, whom he hadn't set eyes on for a lifetime. Nora, at last; Nora in Ditch-water again, and almost within arm's length of him.

The events of weeks fell away from young Billy Somers like a heavy overcoat that he threw off.

There was no rush of work in office and lines; there was no war; there was no vaster issues. Here, filling his horizon again and setting his heart thumping wildly against his belt, was this slip of a summer-frocked girl who meant everything to him, who was made for him. The Lane, the carts, the sky, were blotted out from his vision. Here she was, his darling, face to face with him as she'd been that last time when she had met him—and had cut him dead.

What was going to happen this time? Would she cut him again? Must he pretend that there, in the blocked and glaring Lane between the dusty hedges, *he* didn't see *her*?

Then it flashed upon him that she wasn't alone. Beside her was that fellow, Hunter, the M.O. Nora was looking up at him from under her shady hat brim.

With that fellow——

But what was to happen?

Billy (undecided and turning a little white under his extra tan) looked stiffly to his front and prepared if necessary to ignore as well as to be ignored. But this evidently wasn't Nora's idea at all. She saw, she recognised him. She gave him a little wave of the hand and a smile as brightly finished as certain kinds of artificial silk.

"Hullo, Mr. Somers! How d'you do!" she cried in a voice that Billy hardly recognised; so effusive it was, so triumphantly gay. He didn't guess at the tumult behind that manner, nor how Nora, taken unawares, scarcely knew what she was saying or how she said it. His was not the only heart that had been set beating wildly, the only eyes from which everything was blotted out but the sight of a face. . . . It was the first time she had seen him in khaki; he looked so tall, so burnt, so adorable. . . .

And just because she could not admit to herself that she still adored Billy Somers with all her heart,

whatever he'd done—just because of this, the reckless little Celt told herself that she hated him so violently. That, if she'd had a knife in her hand then, she would have loved to drive it into him. Metaphorically, she did clutch the nearest weapon; one that suddenly appeared to her.

"You haven't heard, have you," she went on to the tight-lipped Billy, "the news about *us*?"

"News?" repeated young Somers, feeling robbed of all power of speech and action. Yet, the time *before* the last time he'd seen this girl, he had known well enough what to say and do. That time he had held her in his arms. (The memory of the thrill was stamped upon every inch and ounce of him.) He had smothered her "Yes" in a kiss as long as six. Now here he stood before her like a helpless fool, stammering: "News? What news? About what—who?"

"Why! About Captain Hunter and me," returned Nora, quickly and brightly. "No; I suppose you haven't had time to hear. I only got back from Wales on Tuesday. We're engaged, you know."

"Engaged——"

Billy's eyes turned from the flushed and sparkling face of Nora to the dark face of Hunter.

Certainly an extraordinary sort of expression was dawning upon it. . . . Extraordinary? No. The rotter was only looking as if he had just heard of the rout of the whole German Army and the suicide of the Kaiser. Naturally Hunter would look like



Edward Cassell

“Engaged——” Billy’s eyes turned from the flushed and sparkling face of Nora to the dark face of Hunter

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that if Nora— She was engaged to Hunter? Engaged? So this was what had happened while they were both away at his sister's, was it? Engaged——

This was a facer. That knife had gone straight home; and he could not speak.

But Nora went on, gaily, with scarcely a trace of strain in her voice.

“Oh! You haven't the monopoly of being engaged, you know, Mr. Somers! But we've heard all about *you!*”

“*What* about me?” blurted out Billy like a school-boy.

“Why, the great news of you and Miss Lily Goosey——”

“*Which*——”

“So *of course* you must let me congratulate you. *Such* a pretty girl. . . . You *must* feel pleased with yourself!”

A ration cart intervened for a moment. It was across the tailboard that Billy Somers echoed grimly, “Pleased?”

“What? *Aren't* you?” she laughed, almost naturally.

The pack of carts, with much jolting and jerking, began to move slowly forward again. Nora, too, made a movement to go on.

Billy blurted out, “There's only one thing that would make me feel pleased.”

"Oh!" said Nora, turning upon him the little face that had never looked so maddeningly pretty, with the poppy-flush of bravado in her cheeks, the dare-devil dance of her eyes. She'd played up well, she knew. "Only one thing? What's that?"

"To go out to France and get shot," retorted young Somers, curtly. He saluted, turned on his heel, and was off.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was one other person who was even more amazed than Billy Somers had been at the announcement by Miss Wynne-Pritchard of her engagement to Captain Hunter.

This was Captain Hunter himself.

Left there in the Lane by the side of the girl he'd scarcely had a word with since that morning on the sands (and whom he had overtaken at the post-office only five minutes before), he turned to her, incredulously.

"You mean that?" he demanded.

"Yes!" said Nora, still flushed and sparkling from her triumph over that other man, her head in the air, hardly conscious of anything except how she'd scored off Billy.

"You meant it? You have thought it over, then?" exclaimed Captain Hunter. "You're going to have me?"

"You heard me say so!" said the girl, defiantly; the defiance was still for Billy, quickly vanishing in the distance. ("He heard me," thought she.)

"Heard you—well, rather," took up Captain Hunter, looking down upon her in bewilderment, amusement, delight. "But, don't you see"—he

laughed, still puzzled but exultant—"it was the *first* I'd heard of it! Talk about *breaking* the good news, Nora! This was *smashing* it, with a vengeance," he went on, recovering himself from what had been the surprise of his not unchequered career. "What a quaint, delicious darling it was, to give a man his answer like that!"

Nora, still thrilling with her achievement, thought, "He got *his* answer!" still meaning Billy. The thought buoyed her up so that for some instants still she hardly realised that in hitting out at Billy, her late lover, with the weapon that seemed to have been put into her hand, she had done something that was to hurt herself just as badly.

"How like your originality," Captain Hunter said, tenderly, "to announce, then and there, that you are going to marry me——"

At these words Nora turned suddenly; seeing again where she was. Namely, in dusty Love Lane, with a young man whom she really knew very little, and—yes! whom she had positively said she was going to marry.

"Oh," she began with a little gasp. The M.O. gave a quick but unobtrusive glance about him. (Somers' back had disappeared; the ration carts were rumbling out of sight.) He took Nora's hand. His touch helped to bring her back to earth again with a jar. She quite snatched her fingers out of his.

"Please don't," she said, breathlessly. "Let—let's go on walking along, shall we?" and she began to walk again.

Over her shoulder, Captain Hunter remonstrated in the low-pitched voice that he must have known by this time was an attraction. "What? You've been very cruel to me for a long time, dearest. Won't you be a little kind to me now?"

He was very close to her; he put a hand on the rounded arm in its pink sleeve. Little Nora pulled herself away with a jerk as indignant as if a stranger had been impertinent. He asked her to be "kind"—to *him*.

"Look here," he murmured, "what about my rights—no, I won't call them my *rights*, as an engaged man?"

A sharp pang of dismay rent Nora at this.

Oh, what had she done? Of course— Without thinking what it involved, she had let herself in for this. She'd plunged straight into it. It was naturally to be expected of her that she would be what this darkly handsome young man called "kind" to him. She'd accepted him publicly. She hadn't meant anything by it except to slash out at the man who had let her down. (Still, Captain Hunter didn't know that, and she could never tell him that.) Having accepted him, she would have to let him kiss her.

Possibly no young man understands how much more a kiss means to a woman than it does to one of

his own sex. One suspects an almost universal male attitude of, "*Hang it, anyway it's a kiss*"—to quote the legend on that pretty picture post card. This consolation is not for us when the kiss is threatened by the wrong man. . . . It is the girl-readers of this story to whom one turns for sympathy for Nora at this moment.

She felt that she couldn't. Not yet . . . not yet!

She turned a little, set profile towards him. Shakily, she protested: "It's so horribly like all the Tommies and the housemaids—in this lane——"

Quite gently Captain Hunter agreed: "All right, my sweet one. I won't ask you just yet."

Nora thought it was because he was, after all, a "nice" man that he didn't insist. (Actually it was because he knew so much more than do most "nice" men of the value of waiting for all things that, up to now, had come to him. Appropriate enough, that the badge upon his khaki should be of twisted serpents!) Nora gave a tiny sigh of relief; what he muttered in the depths of his heart need not be printed here. Only, as they walked, he caught her ungloved hand again and kissed it; first on the dimples that Nora wore instead of knuckles, and then on the pink palm of it—all before she knew that he was going to do it. She had an instinct to rub the little hand, hard, against her skirt.

"I mustn't," she thought, a little wildly. "Lots of girls *have* to put up with things like that!"

The couple walked on—to all outward appearances happily enough! passing one or two people—the old Dean, a couple of young New Army officers, the butcher's wife—as they went. Thank goodness, thought Nora, that they were nearly at the end of the Lane . . . it had been a long one! She could say good-bye to Captain Hunter at the turning to the field path which was the short cut up to the White House. . . . But he had other views.

“I'm actually free until half-past five,” he told her. “So you will let me see you home and stay with you for a little moment” (coaxingly), “won't you?”

Nora hesitated, her dismayed eyes on the hedge hung with its dusty garlands of wild clematis. Must she let him stay? Would it seem too odd, not to?

“Very well,” she agreed, with dry lips.

All the flush and the sparkle of that so-successful encounter with Billy had died out of her now. She *must* call them back! She simply *must* think of nothing but how splendid it was to pay back her late lover in his own coin.

Just as she was telling herself this, Captain Hunter himself raised the subject.

“Somers was in a pretty paddy just now,” he commented, “when you congratulated him!”

Nora lifted her head. “Oh, yes; did you notice?” she took up, eagerly. “I expect I know why he was so cross——”

The M.O. gave a little, pleased laugh. "I suppose because he'd had to put up with the next best. It was obvious who *he* always wanted to marry, my Nora. No wonder he looked put off when he heard our news. That was what you meant?"

"No, no; oh, no," broke hastily from Nora of the mixed race.

Alas that each of those races to which she belonged should be of those who speak first and think afterwards! "I mean that he guessed I knew about how badly he behaved——"

The instant these words were out of her lips she longed to recall them. Too late. The man by her side turned quickly to her.

"Behaved when? I always thought," he took up with interest, "that he was carrying on rather a flirtation with Mrs. What's-her-name—you know—that rather amusing Mrs. Hallett; was he?"

"Oh! I don't think so—oh, no," said Nora, turning to him, genuinely shocked. "A flirtation with a *married* woman? No, *no!*"

"What's he been up to, then?"

Nora pulled a long grass from the hedge and walked along swinging it, her eyes on its shadow. She was ashamed.

"I—I oughtn't to have said that about Mr. Somers."

"Of course you can say anything to *me*, now. Can't you? What is this enormity of our friend's?"

If you don't tell me, I shall think it was something unspeakable——"

"Some people *would* think it unspeakable," broke quite passionately from Nora (before she meant to answer), "to propose to more than one girl at a time!"

Captain Hunter's black eyes snapped with amusement. Up to now he would very much rather have been discussing something else during this walk: himself and herself. But he wanted to see if he were yet able to make this little girl tell him things she didn't want to. Besides which, this was getting rather interesting about that young cub, Billy Somers. Gently he questioned her.

"My darling, how could he possibly propose to more than one girl at a time?"

"I only meant in one evening."

"He did that?" incredulously.

"Yes!" said Nora, swinging her grass.

"Oh, come now. Are you pulling my leg, Nora?"

"No." A shake of the downcast head. "I'm not."

"In one evening? Great Scott, what evening?"

Another pause. At the bottom of her thoroughly miserable little heart Miss Wynne-Pritchard knew perfectly well that she was behaving atrociously herself this afternoon. Flinging herself head foremost into an engagement-from-pique; deceiving the man

whom she had said she would marry; and now giving away the absent Billy to him. . . .

Then she thought: "Well? Isn't what Billy did far more dishonourable? He can't say he didn't do it. And *I* don't care!"

So with a little defiant tilt of her head, she went on giving him away. "It was that evening, if you must know, at the dance. You know, ages and ages ago. At least, everything seems ages since—since the war. It was at the Loamshires' dance."

"Ah!" he said, very quickly. And now he really was all agog. The evening of the Loamshires' dance; he'd a reason of his own for remembering that dance, and of being keen to hear anything fresh about young Somers' behaviour on that occasion. He (Hunter) had imagined he had failed in his plan of a doped drink that should make the boy forget himself. But had there been anything?

"At the Loamshires' dance," he repeated, "and young Somers went about proposing to girls in batches, you say?"

"Not 'batches,'" said Nora. "But I know there must have been—" "Three" was on the tip of her tongue. *That* she did stop herself saying this time.

"Well, how many?" demanded the M.O., smiling but alert. "Six?"

"I don't know of six," said Nora, with an attempt to be flippant. "But you know that everybody knows that he got engaged to Miss Goosey at

that dance; she has been going about telling people."

"So I heard. Hotbed of gossip this place is," murmured the M.O., with a glance back towards the grey roofs and the cathedral spires.

"Yes. Well, she—Miss Goosey—was not the only girl."

"Sure? "

"Yes," said Nora, and she crumpled up the long piece of grass to toss it quite violently into the hedge again.

"The other girls, then; who were they? "

"I—I *know* I ought not to say."

"Did you promise them? "

"No."

"Well, then, tell me," coaxed Captain Hunter.

"Or don't you really know, perhaps? "

"I do know," announced Nora.

"Well? " he smiled. "Was it——"

Before he could say another word, a sudden terror took Nora lest he should ask, crudely, "Was it you? "

So, feeling somehow hunted, she blurted out, hurriedly, "It was a girl I know quite well. It was a friend of mine."

"A friend——"

"Yes, but I—I won't tell you her name."

Half a mile away the cathedral chimes sounded faintly, "One—two—three—four——"

Captain Hunter said with a probing glance, "Miss Halliday!"

This was the name of the first girl he could think, at that moment, of having met at the White House. From the quick change on Nora's expressive little face he saw that his shot in the dark had been a lucky one.

"No, no," protested Nora, staunchly, but once more belatedly.

He insisted, "Ah, yes it was! The Dean's daughter. I see it was! Well! And was it because she turned Somers down that he went straight off and proposed to old man Goosey's girl?"

"She didn't turn him down. She accep—" began Nora, and stopped. She nearly stamped her foot on the road. Why could she not recall those words?

"She *accepted* him?" cried Captain Hunter, also stopping where he stood. Then (for he was a rapid thinker) he suddenly laughed aloud. So that was it? The dope that he had dropped into that other fellow's bubbly had had its effect after all? This was the effect.

"He proposed to both Miss Halliday and Miss Goosey, and they *both* accepted him at our dance?" he laughed, full of malice completely satisfied. "By Jove! *Two* strings to his bow?"

Nora flushed up from rose-white throat to coal-black hair as she remembered (for the severalth time

since she got back from Wales) that the "strings" had been three. This she must hide at all costs from the man who was questioning her, even if it meant fibs. Quickly she went on walking again, and quite briskly she said: "Well, there's only one string left now. Poor Lorne Halliday went away, you know, almost directly after that dance. She wrote to release him. I'd a note from her to tell me so."

They had reached the turning into the fields now, and Captain Hunter held open the gate. "Good Lord, what a fellow," he remarked with the zestful self-righteousness of one who knows himself unsuspected. "And did you have a dance with him at all?"

"Yes," admitted Nora, shortly, as she passed through the gate, trying to forget how many dances there had been before **THAT** one.

"And was he sober—I mean, was there anything odd about him then?"

"I don't know what he was like to his other partners. He—seemed all right to me, I suppose."

"Not—excited or anything? What did he talk about? D'you remember?"

Too, too clearly was there burnt in upon Nora's memory every syllable of Billy's proposal to her at that dance; the boyish tenderness of the tone, "*But, look here, darling; I do love you!*" the adorably masterful voice that rapped out, "*Let me catch any of 'em at it again, that's all!*" when she told him

that other men had said they loved her. She saw again the smooth, primrose-coloured head above the scarlet shell jacket; she felt again the long kiss that rendered hateful to her the mere thought of all other kisses . . . and she gave a little furious shrug, as if to shake all that away from her.

Petulantly she retorted: "Oh, I don't remember what he talked about! Why are we bothering to talk about him?"

Captain Hunter's eyes lighted up.

"Yes, *why?*" he returned so tenderly that Nora shivered a little, and said, hastily, "I mean, I'm not interested in him, except I can't understand why he behaved so disgracefully," here she clenched her little hands by her skirt until the dimples vanished and the knuckles stood out white, "behaved so absolutely disgracefully to a friend of mine!"

"Gad, yes," said Hunter, sympathetically. "What a thing to do! He couldn't have even known what he was saying— But, as you say"—here he held the gate of the field path open for her—"why are we talking about him, now? Isn't there—ourselves, darling? And, look here, you called me Captain Hunter. It will have to be Rex now, Nora."

"Rex," said Nora, absently.

"Thank you," he said, and fastened his dark eyes on her face. They walked up to a bend in the path; the hedge to the left hid the gate into Love Lane, and

on the right only the chimneys of Nora's home were to be seen holding white fingers above a clump of tall bushes.

"No Tommies about here," he told her, softly, standing to face her in the field. "They don't come this way, sweet. So——"

He turned upon her the glance that asks, so much more definitely than words, for a kiss. . . . It is a moot question whether that glance has more power to thrill, upon occasion, than it has power to repel.

This occasion was of the second kind, and again Nora Wynne-Pritchard felt sweeping over her a sense of the utter impossibility of the situation. Yet what could she do this time? Only a trivial and well-worn excuse occurred to her.

Precipitately she remarked, "I've got rather a headache."

"Have you?" said the M.O., tenderly, and inwardly telling himself that here was the most *difficult* little tease he had ever had to deal with, but that he would make her pay for it thoroughly later on. "I shall have to prescribe for you. Look here, I'll take you straight home quickly and see that you have some tea at once, good and strong. And then," he added as they walked on, "since you have announced our news, and Somers will probably have passed it on already, hadn't we better see what your people have got to say about it, what?"

Her people!

Another jolt for Nora. She hadn't yet had time to think about having to tell her people!

It was the last thing she wanted. All she wanted was to be left alone. . . . But she realised quickly that to tell her people was now the only thing to do. It would never do for her father and mother to hear from anybody else that she was engaged to this Captain Hunter. Already she wished to Heaven that she had bitten her tongue out before it had uttered the fatal announcement into which she'd been goaded by the sudden sight of the only man to whom she ever really wished to be engaged. . . . Oh, Billy—oh, Billy. . . .

But she *was* engaged to the M.O., and now everybody else would *have* to know it.

Horrors. . . .

And she couldn't make excuses about headaches for ever.

"Poor, sweet, dark head!" said Captain Hunter, softly, to her.

At this she did give him a little smile.

(To make up to you for what I said about any kiss being a kiss to a man, I will admit that almost any compliment is a compliment to a woman.)

She liked Captain Hunter when he did not insist upon any other sort of love-making. She wanted pretty things to be said to her by somebody. "Rex" Hunter said them nicely enough.

But to think that she was engaged to him! She, who had given him so very little thought since she came home. Why, even this afternoon, before she met him, she had been like the girl in the Scots ballad which, she thought, said something to the effect that

*" Little thought Grizel Hamilton, that morn when
up she raised,
That it would be the hindermost of all her single
days! "*

It's true she hadn't definitely refused him, that time by the sea. But how a woman does loathe refusing outright when there is a possibility of saying, " Let me think it over——"

Now, without " thinking " any more, she was engaged!

Anyhow, she thought, desperately, now she would be able to have something wherewith to turn the conversation of her father and mother from the cause of Mr. Somers. They'd been pleading it ever since she came home from Wales, where she'd been on a visit to cousins after leaving the house of Nellie Milbanke. Major Wynne-Pritchard had told her it was a thousand pities she couldn't make it up with her sweetheart; and her mother had gone so far as to declare " and even if it's true that he's engaged to this appalling little vulgarian from The Retreat, sure anybody can see that the wretched boy has been

'driven into it out of pique and that you're to blame, Nora, entirely!"

Now, she (Nora) could say, "Well, I'm engaged to somebody else myself!" She was afraid that her people would scarcely be pleased.

And now here they were, she and her brand-new *flancé*, at the end of the short cut through the fields to the White House.

Tea was laid out on the lawn already. In deck chairs her father, who had just come down from another dispiriting day at the War Office, and her mother sat, waiting for her. The gate clicked, and they looked up. . . .

Now for it——

CHAPTER XV

THIS story skips about terribly, I am afraid. But what can one do when it concerns itself with so many people, each going his or her own gait in different directions?

Again it leaves Billy Somers in that little three-ringed Hades of his own affairs. It leaves Nora, scarcely happier than he in the new condition which she had brought upon herself. It had left Lorne for some time in London, where she had given up her secretarial work and had become a V.A.D. in a big hospital, and where she was to be found scrubbing lockers and saying, "Yes, Matron," with the utmost meekness to a determined woman who wouldn't know a Greek particle if she saw one (but who had the eye of a lynx for a towel in the wrong ward), and thinking, in every "off" moment, of Billy still!

It betakes itself (the story, I mean) to a *milieu* where the course of love ran, if not smoothly, at least with prattling unconsciousness over every obstacle.

This of course was the so-called "Retreat," Ditch-water.

At last that glaringly new stone palace of Mr. Goosey's was serving a purpose for which it was

admirably suited. It had become a humming hive of young officers, as new as its own stonework and as reliable, but usually more decorative. Some of them—well, if it hadn't been for this war we should certainly never have seen them in uniform; but this would have been a pity. Yes; and even those who were most jealous for that uniform (old soldiers like the Colonel and the boy Billy Somers) admitted freely that those lads did the uniform no discredit, that they were "good lads" all of them.

Their new and unparalleled billet resounded with their cheery young voices, their tramp, their "old things"; their laughter mingled with the enraptured giggles of the whole flock of Gosling girls, each of whom found herself delightedly in possession of at least two attendant swains. Even Babs, the fourteen-year-old, discussed the question of tying her curls with an immense black bow to please Lieutenant Williams or encircling them with a sky-blue ribbon as preferred by Lieutenant Brown. (None of the household could ever bring themselves to say plain "Mr." to anything with a Sam Browne on; it didn't "sound right" to them.) The lads were keen workers, but played with equal ardour, in the Englishman's way.

In the hours off duty a kind of three-coloured atmosphere composed of khaki, the white flutter of girls' frocks, and the lemon-yellow of their hair, pervaded every inch of the place. They played tennis on

those impeccable lawns ; they danced in the hall Mess room to the music of the two-hundred-guinea pianola, they were even getting up a revue of their own, entitled "By Numbers!" (proceeds to go to the Y.M.C.A. tent in the Deanery garden) and they gave Lily Goosey and her sisters such a taste of new life that the whole lot of those light-hearted young creatures felt that though war was "simply terrible and all that" still it was impossible to deny the fact that having ten officers billeted in the house was

*"A silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining,"*

not to say glittering with an exceeding great brightness.

The Lily of the Valley, who had found life so stimulating as an engaged girl, began to find it ever more exciting as an engaged girl surrounded by a flock of other young men. Particularly as her own, legitimate young man in the Old Army could not manage to get in time to come and see her. You think that she was extraordinary, to "mind" so little about this? Have you ever met these girls, and seen these engagements, of which the young man himself is but a part and by no means the better part?

She did meet her "own" young man one morning shortly after the unexpected announcement of Miss

Wynne-Pritchard's engagement. She, Lily, was dashing along in her little car with a supply of peaches from The Retreat for the hospital; and he, Billy Somers (whose Banshee was in dock for the moment), was striding moodily up to the proposed site for the new huts.

He was worried enough about these huts (sometimes it seemed to him that the men would have to stay under canvas during the downpouring of an English Christmas) quite apart from the question of whether he were engaged or not.

Now, was he?

Of course he had been engaged to three girls at once, but two of them had definitely cried off. One of them had done so in the little note that it broke Billy's heart to think of. It had taken the boy half the night to answer Lorne Halliday's order of release without saying either too much or too little—so difficult when one does not know what to say at all!

The other girl (from whom he had never wished to be parted!) had "released" him in several of the most cruel ways that can be thought of. The snub direct, the cut infernal, and finally the announcement of her engagement to another man—and such a man!

Had she picked out on purpose a fellow he, Billy, had always loathed? To think of him—with her! But no. Better not to think.

To return to the third girl, who was still left to him, apparently, as a *fiancée*. . . . Towards this girl he found himself in the attitude that some people are towards a correspondent whose letter they should have answered at once. They did not do so. They put it off and put it off. The answering became more difficult with every day, every week that went by; it became, finally, impossible. So Billy, who should have made a clean breast of his true feelings towards Miss Goosey that first morning in the garden, had found that he simply couldn't go and see her. Then, what with the war, and with that knock-out blow from Nora, he had lacked energy and spirit for the effort required to write to Miss Goosey. So she imagined she was engaged to him. (A weird sort of *fiancé* she must have thought him!) Her people considered that she was engaged to him. Their delusion was now shared by half the population of Ditchwater; in a kind of unpleasant dream he had received notes of congratulation; and people had come up to him to wish him "joy." Billy had taken this with the non-committal mumble with which his sex is allowed to forego the definite *answer* always demanded of ours; and, save in white-hot moments of work, his spirits seemed to sink lower with every day that went by. The gloom did not lift from his brow this morning when he beheld the exceedingly pretty girl in the car that pulled up at the sight of him.

"Hullo, stranger!" sang out Lily Goosey, gaily,

leaning out and proffering both those absurd hands of hers. "How are you? Don't you think it's awfully good of me to speak to you, considering the way you've neglected me? I don't believe" (with a pout and a glance under the coquettish motor hat), "I don't believe you love me any more!"

"How are you?" said Billy, hurriedly, wishing he were anywhere—in Mesopotamia, say. "I say, you know—I don't know what to say for myself." He stood beside the car, fidgeting; and the breeze caught a bunch of regimental ribbons that had been tied onto Miss Lily's mascot of a silver swift, and whipped them across his sleeve. "I say, I have been meaning to come and see you, for absolute ages, but——"

Lily interrupted him with her sunniest smile. "It's all right, Billy-boy. I didn't mean that I was really t'ross. I'm quite friends. We know you've been most fearfully rushed."

"I have, really," said Billy, putting a foot on the step and looking quite gratefully into the pink face.

Lily caught back the mascot ribbons and played with them as she talked. "Really, we haven't been expecting you, Billy. We had such miles of other things to think about— Oh, that's rather a nasty one, isn't it!" with a gurgle. "I don't mean I haven't thought about you, of course! Only, with all the officers up at our place now—well, we can hardly find time to turn round. Ma says the catering is a terror. You should see the merry old books every

week now! Not that she grudges anything. It's the least we can do, and after all we've got it! And of course I have to help her to think what the officers would like——"

"Of course," agreed Billy, mechanically, upon which Lily gurgled again, struck him playfully with the bunch of ribbons and exclaimed: "Oh, I wouldn't *show* I was so jealous of anybody else getting any attention! It's quite all right, Billy. You come up and see. You will come, when you've time, I suppose?"

"Rather!" said poor Billy, who could not have been more depressed over the prospect of five years in a German fortress. Then as he took his foot off the step again he thought he must say something merry and bright to the girl. He uttered the first "bright" thing that came into his head: a quotation from a song:

"*'How's your father? all right?'*"

"Oh, yes; Pa's ever so well, ta," returned Miss Goosey, all dimples and pearly teeth. "It cheers him up a lot having all the officers about the place. Says it makes him think what it would have been like if all us girls had been boys; not that he'd change us, I don't suppose! Do you know he's throwing the little morning room and the book room into one, so that they can have an extra smoking room? Well, you'll see it when you come up; I simply must buzz off now."

She took the wheel into her microscopic hands, looked down the road, and added, inconsequently: "I suppose you haven't seen our Lieutenant, Mr. Orpington, about, have you, Billy? You know him, don't you? Yes; he said he's met you—called you 'the awf'y silent chap.' I did laugh. He said you were a lucky dog, too. I wonder why?" (archly). "He's got such a splendid voice! You wait till you hear him in our revue." She looked about again. "I said I'd pick him up about half-past four and motor him home for tea. (You know we've given up all our cars to the soldiers, except this one and the big one, but one or two of the officers have them of their own, of course.) Perhaps he's waiting for me outside the hospital now!—Well, cheerio. Come soon!"

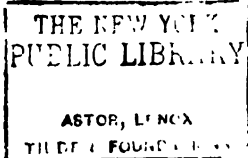
"Good-bye," returned the dazed Billy and went on his way with her chatter buzzing in his ears; her pink-and-white-and-blue-and-gold still shining in his eyes.

Scarcely a hundred yards away, at the break in the hedge between the road and the big stretch of field avenued by those lines of white tents, he met another member of the blonde beauty's family. This was Papa Goosey himself, dressed in the same vociferous checks and carrying the same hunting or golfing crop that he had wielded that morning at the Deanery.

With the same boisterous good-humour he greeted, at twenty yards, the approaching young man.



"I suppose you haven't seen our Lieutenant, Mr. Orpington, about, have you, Billy?"



"Ah, Billy, my boy! . . . 'Ow's yourself? . . . And what may you be doing these days?" This sentence brought him within shoulder-thumping reach of his favourite. "Too busy to tear yourself away from the Camps 'ere? Too busy even to come up and give an eye to your hintended? Bless you, no." A second thump. "I'm not complaining of you. I approve of giving the affairs of the 'eart a back seat at the present crisis; time for them presently. 'Ave a cigar."

He brought out a case filled with the infant Zeppelins that he affected.

"Nothing like sticking to your job," he went on, standing like a very short-legged Colossus astride of a huge rut in the road, made by one of the camp lorries, while he lighted the cigar. "And what's the job now?"

Billy, pushing his cap back from his heated and knitted brow, explained that all the canvas in the field beyond them was to be struck and that huts were to be erected; and that at present all the arrangements therefore were in an infernal muddle.

Enormous interest gleamed from the shrewd blue eyes of Mr. Goosey. "'Uts, eh?" he repeated. "'Uts? For 'em to live in? To be sure!" His eyes roved over the tents that were to be replaced. "An Englishman's 'ome is 'is 'ut, nowadays. T. and G. now, Billy, or weather-boarding?" But he ran on

(it was a way the family had) without waiting for an answer from the young man who, preoccupied and bored, longed fervently to shake him off.

“On this soil, now”—here he dug his heel into the rut. “Let me see”—he peered past the field to a gentle slope of country dotted with copses and cottages, stretching away to the blue border of the horizon—“where are they to be?”

Billy explained that certain Staff Officers were coming down to Ditchwater the next morning to decide, finally, upon the site of the hutments.

Fresh interest lighted up the face of the older man standing there.

“Are they, now? By gum, I’d give a crown to hear what they say about it. There’s no doubt at all in *my* mind,” he added, tapping a pudgy finger on the breast of Billy’s jacket. “I could like right well to ’ear these Generals talking about a matter like that. As a practical man, I mean. Not that I despise ’em,” he added, kindly, in answer to the very blank look on Billy’s sunburnt face. “Now, my own ideer would be this.” He pointed with that inevitable crop in illustration. “You take a line from *there*, to yonder. Got that?”

The young soldier nodded, thinking of a sergeant-instructor there had been when he was at Sandhurst not at all unlike Mr. Goosey. “From there to yonder. Now, my advice would be, keep on the topside of that line all the time. You’d save in ’aulage——”

"Quite," put in Billy, now, like Keats' sweet peas, on tiptoe for a flight. "But——"

Mr. Goosey took the simple way with interruptions; he raised an already powerful voice. "You'd save in land drains. You'd 'ave a better road"—another kick at the rut—"in the bad weather."

"Oh, yes, rather. I'm sure you're quite right," Billy got in, hastily, "but I'm afraid I'll have to be pushing on——"

Burr-like, Mr. Goosey clung to his elbow. "I'll come a bit of the way with you," he said, entering the field with Billy, and flourishing his own crop in answer to the sentry's salute. "Now, where was I? Ah, yes. Drain pipes. Land drains," he continued with the same gusto as he had shown in discussing H-girders with the weary Dean. "I could get 'em pipes as cheap as any General in the British Army. You ask"—a tap with the crop on Billy's arm—"you ask any o' your Generals where they can buy agricultural pipes at six bob a thousand! Two-inch pipes, mind you. They won't save the rate-payer's money like that; not they," he wound up with feeling. "If it wasn't that they got the labour free," he glanced round at the ant-like activities of the Camps, "they couldn't keep their shutters open a week against Thomas Goosey. Aye!" with a gusty sigh; "I could like to see your Generals!"

It was perhaps as the only means of getting rid of him that Billy held out a vague hope that he might

possibly just see the General. If Mr. Goosey happened to be walking that same way to-morrow between ten and eleven, well, the General would probably be there!

Could Mr. Goosey ask for anything better?

The next morning at that time and place beheld those chessboard checks, those sport's stockings, that cap and the crop in close proximity to the scarlet tabs of the General and the two Staff Captains who had come down from town and who had met the Colonel at the Camp. It was the Colonel who, catching sight of Mr. Goosey on the road and knowing him as the most generous host of the neighbourhood, introduced him as "somebody who knows a good deal about this job, sir," and Billy, hovering in the background, beheld Mr. Goosey's radiant gratification, and heard the voice that could give points to the conductor of a Tube train, replying an enquiry of the Staff Officers.

"Well, General, it depends upon the road to it. Are you going to 'ave a made road? It's an 'eavy clay, this; terribly 'eavy. There'll be two foot o' mud in the winter, and in summer it bakes like firebrick. Look at the cracks 'ere!" (stamp). "Now, below the 'edge there, there's a houtcrop o' gravel. It wouldn't make forty yards difference, General, and you could bridge the beck as easy as winking. I should take that way."

"Let's have a look at it," said the General (a

thin, grey-haired man with a stoop); and the little procession of five officers and a civilian moved on; Mr. Goosey now quite taken into the conversation, which turned to water supply, drainage, prevailing winds, as they walked.

"Ought to make you Division Officer, Mr. Goosey," said the General, good-naturedly. "Now, where's the nearest point of the railway here? Give me the map, Crooks."

The discussion went on, with references to maps, with pacings of distances, jotting in notebooks. . . . It was broken in upon by a quite explosive remark from Mr. Goosey: "By gum, but I should like to have a go at it! Are the tenders in, Mr.—General, I mean?"

The soldier turned. "Tenders for what, Mr. Goosey?"

"For the whole boiling: 'uts, roads, water, all the job lot. You see, gentlemen——"

Here the squat, chessboarded figure took the field into his confidence; bristling with energy, eyes gleaming, crop waving as he held forth.

—"You see, it's this way. I'm a contractor. I'm retired. I could sign my name to a tidy figure, I could; but when I see a job going, it—it's like the old war-'orse and the trumpets. It's my 'obby. I'm a practical man, I can give you all the references you'd want, General. You go up North and hask any of 'em whether Thomas Goosey is a solid man or

not! And the fact is, I *can't* retire. When I see a job like this 'ere——"

The General's mild accents made themselves heard at last. "Are the tenders in?" he asked of one of the Captains. (Apparently the tenders were even then not in.) "Then send for Army Form XOI (C. 2)." . . . And, briefly, that was how this practical enthusiast-on-his-job came into the Ditchwater huts contract.

Radiant, uplifted, and looking ten years younger, the contractor-who-could-not-retire now prepared to rush off home and look up catalogues, price lists, trade papers; as happy as a king.

But before he departed, he turned to the tall young figure in attendance on the Colonel, to bestow another of those staggering thumps of his upon the boy's shoulder.

"It's all thanks to you, Billy, my lad," Mr. Goosey said to him in a breezy whisper behind the retiring backs of the General and his satellites. "I owe you the job, in a manner of speaking, and 'e owes you the man that can do it."

Here the White-Knightly Colonel looked round for his youthful Adjutant, and Mr. Goosey beamed again upon him as he left.

"It's all right, Colonel," he shouted, affably; "I won't keep your young man a second; just a little family word with my future son-in-law!"

The Colonel's eyes turned from the thick-set,

energetic figure of the contractor to the face of the young subaltern. Below his breath he ejaculated, "Son-in-law?"

For the Colonel was always the last man in Ditchwater, not excepting Major Wynne-Pritchard, to hear Ditchwater news. With a very puzzled look he said, "We've got to congratulate you, then, Somers?"

"Thank you, sir," said Billy Somers, resignedly.

This last incident seemed to him, as he put it, to "tear it." Utterly miserable, he was ready to think: "Well then, why not, after all? I can't get out to France, and here's Nora going to marry that man Hunter. I've upset one girl, I suppose; why upset the other if it's not absolutely necessary? Nothing matters to *me* any more, so why shouldn't I be engaged to the little Goosey?"

CHAPTER XVI

THERE was one house in Ditchwater that had become as gloomy, since the war, as the Goosey mansion had become festive.

This was of course the Wynne-Pritchards'.

Nora, even as she went up to break the news to her people, had known that they would hardly be delighted about her engagement to Captain Hunter.

Without entering any more fully into some painful (but futile) family scenes, I may tell you that her anticipations were more than justified. Perhaps the fact that her people were so "down" on the young man helped a great deal towards making the wilful Nora determined to abide by her own choice. Those were gloomy times at the White House! Then there were dismal evenings when Captain Hunter, there on sufferance, talked specious and ingratiating "Service" talk to the dispirited old Major (who had not yet got his job out of the War Office!). Especially was this the case, when, thinking to please, he spoke slightly of the New Armies compared to "Us"—remarks which met with a profound silence. Then, when Hunter had drawn the not outwardly reluctant Nora with him into the verandah, her people would bring up the table (that had seen the Major through

his service) for their evening game of piquet. Except for keeping the score—"Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen"—they had given up talking very much. Each knew what the other was thinking in the pretty, faded room as the cards fell softly. Sometimes a tear or so would fall too. And then Major Wynne-Pritchard's brown hand would cover his wife's little one on the green table. Sometimes she would give a glance towards the French windows through which the couple had disappeared, and murmur, almost inaudibly, "So—so different from what we'd thought." . . . Sometimes he would growl out a bit of philosophy such as, "We can't live our children's lives for 'em, you know, dear," and she would give him a quivering little smile, and play another card.

Their daughter's engagement was indeed a disappointment to them; too proud not to smile their thanks to the congratulations that came pouring in as if this had been the alliance they had dreamed of.

And to their daughter, how much worse than a disappointment! One heard Nora's pretty laugh, often enough those days; but Nora's real smile was not to be seen. She had built a wall with spikes on top between herself and the father and mother who loved her; above it she peeped with a hard, bright little face and talked platitudes to them about the war and the weather.

The general discomfort of the household was not improved when Nora suddenly asked one morning

that Rex's sister, Nellie Milbanke, might be allowed to come and stay with her. Seeing her father's doubtful tug at his moustache, the girl put on her look, and said, quickly: "She's a great friend of mine. And—she did have me to stay with her, Father, you know."

"M'yes," the Major said, once more wishing to Heaven that he had never let Nora go to those confounded people. He added, "All right." And further, "How long d'you want her to be here?"

It was for a fortnight's visit that young Mrs. Milbanke arrived with a couple of large dress baskets, a dressing bag, and three cardboard hatboxes, splashed across with the name "DELZ." She also brought with her into the shelter of the White House what she would have described as "a bit of life! a breath of fresh air!" but what appeared to Major Wynne-Pritchard an infernal draught. He took a dislike to this showy, vivacious young woman from the moment he saw her having tea in his drawing room, with lips so heavily made-up that they left a vermilion semicircle on the rim of her cup. Consequently, he treated her to an old-world politeness that Mrs. Milbanke put down to her "having got off with the old boy at once. I daresay he'll end up by getting quite larky; they mostly do!"

For the next two days the visitor thoroughly disorganised the quiet running of the house. She had her breakfast in bed and took until midday to dress.

She was continually requisitioning the services of the two maids. "Mary! Just come in a minute and fasten me this, will you?" and, "Cook, will you pop down an iron and get the creases out of this for me?"

She filled every one of the little Indian brass pots in the drawing room with her cigarette ash, and even then the chintz of the couch was often strewn with it as well.

Lunch would be kept waiting for her while she lingered in the town shop-gazing, even in Ditchwater! and questioning Nora about every one whom they met. ("That was rather a sweet little officer boy with the eyeglass; who was he? You didn't know him? Gracious! It was the tall fellow with him; what was his name? Mr. Somers? Somers? Isn't he a friend of Rex's? We ought to make Rex bring some of them to tea.")

Her brother, when he came, she greeted with a volley of good-natured, loud-voiced chaff about the spoony one, at which Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard all but visibly winced.

The sight of her parents' courteous disapproval again roused all the "contrariness" in Nora. She straightway overdid her intention to be "great friends" with this future sister-in-law. She laughed with her; she linked arms about the garden with her; with her she overhauled wardrobes and talked blouses, and crepe-de-Chine *versus* Georgette undies by the hour together. Long after midnight the two

sat up together in the spare room that now looked not unlike a theatrical dressing room. You see, Mrs. Milbanke was a "Thespian"; she carried about with her a collection of mascots and of signed photographs, upon which she held forth to her hostess.

"You see this man in the Pierrot get-up; he was a scream! I made James ask him to stay; he'd a *gorgeous* voice. . . . Such a smart girl, she was; on tour in the company that came down to Cowry Bay, my dear; Rex knew her, of course. I thought he was rather smit' at the time, but it was after he knew you, so that's off. . . . In town she always has her dressing room done in black, white, and green; a black ceiling. Looks so *ripping* with her little red-gold head. You ought to have heard her sing '*Mine, mine, mine*'—" Here Mrs. Milbanke, who was brushing her hair over a poppy-coloured kimono, hummed the tune of the song. "I sing all her things, you know; they just suit my voice."

"Do you?" said Nora from the easy chair by the littered *toilette* table, where she was pretending to herself that she was not one bit tired. "What a pity that you weren't here when they were getting together the people for our local revue."

"Revue?" echoed Nora's guest, dropping her very ornate tortoise-shell-backed hairbrush in her sudden eagerness. "D'you mean they're getting one up in this place?"

With some reserve Nora told her yes; the revue was to be given by some people called Goosey——

—“Goosey! There’s a name to go to bed with!” interpolated the guest.

—who had a huge house and were billeting nine or ten officers from the Camp. These were all in the revue, she believed.

“And Rex never told me of this show!” exclaimed Mrs. Milbanke. Still more eagerly she demanded: “What sort of girls are they having in it? Sticks, I’ll bet. Or—didn’t they ask you to be in it, Nora?”

“Oh, they did,” admitted Nora, with a great show of indifference. She stooped to pick up a handkerchief puff that Nellie had dropped from the table; the floor beside it nearly always was strewn with pins, powder, scent bottle tops. “But I didn’t want to be bothered about it. It would have meant tearing up to that awful—I mean to that place, every second day to rehearse, so——”

Nellie Milbanke threw up her chin in derision. “Oh, you engaged girls! Of course you think every instant is wasted that isn’t spent with ’im. Rex will be bucked. I’ll tell him.”

Nora, stooping again, let her mane of black hair cover her indignantly scarlet little face. “You’re not to say a word to him—please,” she said, sharply. Presently she got up, taking her brushes. “Good-night,” she said with a return to the “great-friendliness,” and she pattered off to her own room before

Rex's sister could entrap her into saying any more about the Gooseys or their affairs.

In bed, Nora thought of the schoolgirlish note on sky-blue paper, decorated with lilies of the valley, which she had received a week ago from The Retreat.

Lily Goosey had begged her dear Miss Wynne-Pritchard to come and sing in the play they were getting up in aid of, etc, etc.

"It's really rather good, it's all the idea of a very clever officer we've got here now called Mr. Orpington who really is practically a professional." [Lily wrote ignoring all stops except commas in her zest.] *"He knows everything about costumes and everything, Cochrane once told him he ought to be in opera, he is going to be the Dyer in the last Ditch, as well as General Service, and Little Willie, and the Nutty Neutral in the last act, Mr. Williams, the very fat one, is to be the Russian Steam-Roller, Mr. Orpington says I had better be Miss Goosey as Herself, but I am to be on in every scene, and will you be so awfully good as to be in Belgium in the tableau, and a vivandière, I am sure you would be most awfully good, please let me know by return of post, as I am arranging the cast with Mr. Orpington. Yours sincerely,*

"LILY G."

"P.S.—Mr. Orpington thinks it would be such fun to have a dance afterwards."

In her quite friendly refusal, Nora Wynne-Pritchard had said nothing at all of her real reason for not wishing to play Belgium *and a vivandière*. Her reason was, of course, that Billy Somers would be sure to be there.

Ever since her engagement to Rex Hunter, she had seemed to hate Billy even more vehemently than before. Yet she would have got engaged again tomorrow, to anybody whomsoever, if she could have the chance of announcing it again to Billy, gloriously, as she had announced it in Love Lane.

Handsome, heartless young brute . . . she wondered how many girls he would propose to at *this* dance, after the revue? To the whole Goosey family, perhaps! To *all* those flappers?

She laughed bitterly into her pillow as she imagined him saying to Babs Goosey, aged fourteen: "I've been mad keen about you ever since I came to this place!" And, "Other men told you that? Let me catch any of 'em at it again, that's all!"

Suddenly Nora buried her whole little quivering face in her pillow.

She wasn't crying; but—she seemed to be getting a very bad cold.

CHAPTER XVII

TWO days later, Nora went into the spare room to call her guest (who was invariably late for meals) down to tea; she encountered rather an odd sight.

Mrs. Milbanke was standing in front of the wardrobe glass with her black-net evening frock tucked up to her scarlet, silk-stockinged knees and girdled by the broad leather strap off her suitcase. Her hair was pulled forward under a scarlet-cloth cap, ornamented by a large regimental badge. She was snapping away at a short, jaunty-looking jacket of covert coating which she had slipped on over her bodice.

"What *are* you doing?" exclaimed Nora, laughing, by the door.

Her guest turned, with a half-deprecating, half-complacent, little giggle.

"Hullo!" she said. She dropped a pair of scissors, and carried her hand up to the cap in a burlesqued salute. "What d'you think of this for a spur-of-the-moment *vivandière* costume, Nora?"

Nora opened her eyes. "*Vivandière?*"

"You know, the Daughter-of-the-Regiment sort of girl. Like Cigarette in 'Under Two Flags,'"

explained Mrs. Milbanke, putting a row of pins into her mouth. "Marches about with the Army——"

"Yes, I know that; but—aren't you coming down?" said Nora, wondering what fancy had taken Rex's sister to dress up. Then she guessed, at the very moment that Mrs. Milbanke announced it.

"Oh, of course, I haven't told you yet!" she said, apologetically. "I've promised to sing in that revue."

Before Nora had time to look surprised she ran on, glibly but nervously:

"It only happened to-day. I was going to do a little shopping when you were at your Red Cross class. I met Miss Goosey driving along, and she asked me if I wouldn't come in to 'By Numbers'——"

Nora said, "But I didn't know you'd met Miss Goosey—before I mean?"

Mrs. Milbanke said, "Oh, I expect she'd been told about my singing and dancing; and she'd know who I was when she saw me——"

Perhaps this sister of the M.O.'s considered this near enough to the truth. A more accurate version would have been that this meeting had taken place not to-day but yesterday, and that Mrs. Milbanke had smiled so pointedly at the quite unmistakable Lily of the Valley as she came out of the principal draper's, that the Lily had stopped, and smiled ingenuously back. Thereupon introducing herself as

Captain Hunter's sister, Mrs. Milbanke had herself turned the conversation (with much difficulty) to the forthcoming revue. . . .

Nora looked at her guest, opened her mouth, but for once did not say what she meant, namely: "Sing in the revue? But how can you, when you're staying with me, and when I refused?" She only said:

"Well, come and have some tea, won't you?"

"I shan't be a sec., changing," promised Mrs. Milbanke, airily. Nora thought her more and more extraordinary; and it made her angry four times over. Once with Nellie Milbanke for being "like this," once with herself for having made such friends with Nellie, and once apiece with her parents for having been right in their opinion of their guest.

The time hadn't yet come for her to be angry a fifth time; namely with Rex because she was his sister.

"Of course if you think it's at all odd for me to be in the show when you aren't, I'll write and cry off," suggested Nellie Milbanke after tea, during which she had been uncharacteristically silent. "Of course Lily Goosey did say I should simply make it, but I'm sure I don't mind," rather offhandedly, "if you'd rather I didn't take part."

"Oh, no," said Nora, "I only want you to do what you like, to have as good a time as you can."

With this plan young Mrs. Milbanke quite fell in.

"You are a dear. Very well," she said. "I've

promised to go up there, to the Gooseys' to-night. We'll talk about it to-morrow."

To-morrow it appeared that Nora's guest had made further arrangements of her own. "Nora, you *don't* mind, do you? Lily absolutely insisted on it. It will be so much more convenient for them, she seemed to think, than to have me racing about from here to The Retreat every day. She wants me to go up and stay there, after I've finished my week with you, dear. You see, *then* I shall be able to be with her all the time," explained Nellie Milbanke, volubly, "and I can be putting them all up to lots of things. That young Orpington there is the only one who has an *idea*, really; the others are hopeless! But of course it's just my mark, all this kind of stunt. You won't be hurt, or anything, will you? You will understand? And will you explain to Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard?"

"Won't *you*?" said Nora, quietly.

At that moment Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard herself came out into the garden where the two girls were picking Michaelmas daisies for the jars as they talked. Nellie Milbanke turned at once to her.

"I'm just thanking Nora for the good time I've had here, and she says I ought to thank you, dear Mrs. Wynne-Pritchard," she began in her best effusive manner. "You know there'll be no getting rid of me out of Ditchwater; as soon as I leave here on

Friday, I'm going up to Mrs. Goosey's; I simply had to promise, they were most pressing, they wouldn't take any refusal. You don't think it strange, I know——"

"Why should I?" returned her hostess with gentle dryness that hid her great relief at losing this guest a week sooner than she had dared to hope. Taking the gathered sheaves of mauve daisies in her arms, she went quickly into the smoking room to greet her husband with the glad news. The Major listened, deliberately stamped an envelope, and then turned in his chair. He only said mildly, "What do you expect of a pig but a grunt?"

"Horace!"

But the Major added more mildly still, "One might even put it in the plural." And began another letter (his twenty-fourth) to the War Office.

"Look here, Nellie, what's all this tomfoolery Nora tells me?"

"What tomfoolery, Rex?"

"Why, about your leaving here and going off to those Goosey people for their theatricals. Is it true?"

"Of course it's true that I'm going to take part in the revue; and they've asked me to stay in the house. Jolly glad to have me. Going to-morrow."

"But your time with the Wynne-Pritchards isn't up yet."

"Oh, I've made it all right with everybody," said young Mrs. Milbanke, airily.

The conversation between the brother and sister took place at three o'clock in the afternoon in Rogerson's, the chief tea shop in Ditchwater, set at the bottom of the narrow High Street, just at the entrance to the Market Square. Captain Hunter had met her just outside.

"Here! I wanted a word with you," he said, and he had dragged her through the confectionery department and into the upstairs room, which was empty. They sat one each side of the little rush table in the window looking up High Street.

"You've made it all right with everybody, have you?" the young man retorted, grimly. "Very well, now you've got to make it all right with me. Understand me, Nellie." (She was looking nonchalantly out of the window at the little knot of traffic—a lorry, two side cars, and a dog—that was congesting the entrance to the Square. "I'm not going to have it.")

"M'm! Not going to have what?"

"Your throwing down my *fiancée's* people like this, for the Gooseys."

"I'm afraid you've got to have it, dear boy," said his sister, calmly, still looking out of the window.

"I promised."

"Then you'll have to make different arrangements.

It's not only beastly rude, but it doesn't happen to suit my book."

"Didn't know you were making a book."

"I didn't bring you here to listen to your cheap jokes," retorted Captain Hunter. His darkly handsome face was very angry, and he tapped peremptorily on the table in front of him. "Now, look here. Nora asked you to stay with her people for a fortnight. At the end of the week you're gadding off on some schoolgirl's rag with a set of young cubs——"

"Full-blown soldiers; your officers, Rex, old thing," she smiled, turning to him. She met a look that almost frightened even Nellie. For the sharpest of all quarrels are those between a brother and a sister; a man and a woman who know too much about each other and who see each other too clearly without any kindly veil of sex illusion to soften the glare of sex antagonism in their eyes.

"Cut that out, Nellie," he said in a voice that Nora would never hear. "If you're going to be rude to Nora and her people, you've got to answer for it to me. You never did have any sense in your head except once, when you caught old James——"

"Well? That was something to be thankful for, wasn't it?" she flipped at him.

"Yes; it was your chance. Now you've jolly well got to let me have mine."

"Chance? Not much money *there*," said his sister, critically. "If you were out to do well for your-

self, why ever didn't you go and freeze on to one of the Goosey girls here? *They'll* come in for something worth while!"

Hunter, looked angrier than ever, dropped his voice after a look about the tea room. "Money's not everything, though you probably don't see that. You wouldn't. I know what I want, and I am going to get it. You ought to know what I mean by this time. You remember how things were at home. Mother was all right socially, but Father—" He shrugged his shoulders. "She made a bad break. We're going to start where they left off. At least I am. And I'm not going to have any relations of mine queering my pitch by a piece of damnable bad taste like——"

Nellie, with temper smouldering in her eyes, pretended to yawn. "Since we are running through this charming little scene of family life in a tea shop, I think I will have a cup of tea, thank you," she remarked. With some violence her brother brought his hand down on the bell before him.

Silence fell while the tea was being brought; silence in which each of the young people was thinking. Each was a schemer; "out," as Nellie put it, to do the best for his or her own hand. She wanted all the amusement after her own heart that she could find; she wanted to "star" it, she wanted admiration—she would have loved the life of the stage, its excitement, its rush, its easy, half-sincere

camaraderie, its constant stimulus, its "good times."

He wanted an undisputed footing among people who, somehow, did not want *him*. Also, he wanted Nora. Genuinely and very much he wanted Nora. She was, up to now, the only girl he'd ever looked at who hadn't seemed ready to fall into his arms at once. He'd got to have her. As his sister poured out tea, Rex Hunter went on a little less angrily but even more firmly: "Now, listen to me, Nell. You're not going to let me down."

"I like that. I let you down? Who wrote to you, weeks ago? Who helped you?"

"Yes, that was all right; now, don't you spoil it. I don't wish you to have anything to do with this Goosey show at all. For some reason or other Nora refused to be in it."

"Nothing to do with me."

"Yes. You've got to follow up Nora's lead."

"Real-ly?"

"You've got to, as long as you're staying at her house. And even then, you couldn't go on from there to total strangers."

"Couldn't I!" exclaimed Nellie Milbanke, with a little laugh over her teacup. "I could if they were amusing. I'm going to have *some time* at The Retreat, just to make up for it. Nothing very gay going on at your Nora's, my lad. The Major writing his eternal old letters to the War Office (I bet

they're sick of the sight of him!) and the mother with absolutely no idea of entertaining or asking a soul up to the house, or——"

"Stop it!" cut in the M.O. "These are going to be my relations. Otherwise," he gave a very cutting glance at the imitation before him of a walking costume and a hat worn by Miss Teddie Gerard, "otherwise you wouldn't be in the house at all."

Mrs. Milbanke coloured angrily, but managed to speak as airily as ever. "Nora invited herself to my house, remember? Of course, it was on your account. At least, I suppose so. Somehow she seemed keener on you then than since she has been engaged to you, Rex," said the sister, planting the dart that seemed to her the most envenomed, without knowing herself quite how deeply it had gone home. "It may be only the way it strikes outsiders." She gave a little sideways glance at his thunderous brow. "Still, I shall have to give up trying to understand these refined, new friends of yours, with their county families, and all——"

"You give up this Goosey idea," her brother advised her, briefly. "A married woman, cavorting about among that crew of cubs and flappers! You drop it."

"And suppose I don't?" she challenged him.

He glanced across the table at the over-powdered and handsome face, singularly like his own.

He said: "Well, suppose I wrote to James? He

wouldn't be too pleased to hear about it all—the cub part, anyway!”

Possibly Captain Hunter said, here, more than he meant. Possibly he had no intention of writing a warning letter to Nellie's husband. It was “up” to Nellie, he considered, to take it as she liked. She finished her tea, and the expression under the daring little hat became dangerously sweet. She stuffed an “Idéal” scented handkerchief into her gold-mesh bag. Then she rose, pulling on her gloves. “I expect you'd like to finish your cigarette, Rex: you'll excuse me, won't you, old stick? I really must fly on and meet Lil Goosey at the stationer's; she'll be waiting for me. I didn't know it was so late. Be good!”

A tapping of Louis heels down the metal-edged stairs of the tea shop, and she was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

ISAY, Mr. Somers, I believe you know some people I know," said the latest joined subaltern, diffidently. "The Hallidays?"

"What Hallidays?" asked Billy, only half hearing, as he moved away from the big blackboard in the classroom.

This was after he had been giving the lecture on "*Attack*," of which he was thoroughly weary, as he gave it about five times a week. There generally lingered on afterwards, from the lectures, a few young officers who wanted to copy diagrams into their notebooks or to ask questions of the lecturer. Billy turned to this very pink and leggy boy, fresh from school, who looked as if he ought to be training to become a curate. He was evidently pining to make friends in a strange place.

"The people at the Deanery," he explained to Billy. "I saw Miss Halliday in London two days ago. She is coming down here, you know."

This Billy quite heard. So Lorne Halliday was to be in Ditchwater again.

Well, he couldn't help that. No doubt the girl would be even more anxious to avoid him than he

was to avoid her. Still, he might as well know when she was coming.

"Oh! When?" he said, as casually as he could manage it.

"Probably to-morrow or Thursday, my aunt told me. I call Mrs. Halliday 'aunt' because she was at school with my mother," volunteered the pink-faced boy.

"Oh, really?" said Billy. "Lecture all clear to you, I suppose? . . . Good," and he turned to one of the others who was waiting for him.

He always felt, with these youngsters, as if he had at least a Colonel's service already, besides the experience of a world-worn man of fifty-five.

We left Billy in that state of mind that says: "Oh, dash it all, I'll marry the girl at once—just to get rid of her!"

Three months before, the last thing he would have dreamed of would be to get engaged to Lily Goosey, with her chocolate box-lid beauty, her schoolgirl prattle, her empty head, and her guileless heart. He had been let in for it by some extraordinary accident which he didn't even now understand. In his heart he knew that he ought not to marry her, simply because in some inexplicable way the engagement had become announced; not even if he had been congratulated by his own Colonel, not even if there did seem nothing to do but to carry on with it.

He thought of that paralysing moment among the roses in the Gooseys' garden; and then, quite suddenly, he remembered the one person to whom he had confided the whole tangle, as far as he knew it.

That evening he sat down and wrote to her, laboriously, a long letter.

Here are some extracts:

"I daresay it's because I've been so busy that I've let things slide like this, but I know it's rotten of me. As a matter of fact, I haven't even been up to the home yet in my 'official' capacity, only partly because I've funked it. But, of course, it's perfectly well understood by everybody. Old Goosey let it out to the Colonel the other day, who congratulated me. So do *you* see any way out? I don't."

Again:

"If I could see even the faintest hope that Nora would break it off with that other fellow I might know what to do. But that appears to be perfectly fixed up. You know how things get about this place; and everybody seems to have got hold of it, somehow, that Major Wynne-Pritchard and his wife were very much against the engagement at first, only Nora actually said she'd leave home unless they gave their consent. So, you see."

Further:

"To-day, to put the tin hat on it, some cheerful idiot told me that Lorne Halliday was coming down again. I shall not be likely to get in her way, though. May I hope for a line from you? I should like to know what you think, even if you think nothing is any good; I'm afraid that's the long and short of it myself."

By an irony of Fate the very thing that he had written of as not likely to happen happened the very next day.

Billy had occasion to go into town to make some purchases. (Men never "shop," as we weak women know.) Tooling moodily along in his Banshee, he was entering the Market Square by that narrow street that Nellie Milbanke had stared into out of the tea-shop window, when he heard sudden loud cries and a clatter of hoofs in front of him.

Jumping out of his car, he found a crowd already gathering. Over the heads he saw a military wagon, a tossing horse's head; the khaki-clad driver hurriedly descending.

"Is he killed——"

"Don't think so——"

"Stand back——"

Hastily Billy pushed his way through. He expected to see the person who had been knocked down

by that wagon; a child, probably. He did see a child in the centre of the throng—a small boy, bleeding from a cut on the head. But it was not by the small boy's cut that the young man's look was caught. A slender, blue-clad, blue-capped figure was kneeling beside the child. The figure turned. Lorne Halliday's dark eyes looked up into his, and Lorne Halliday's voice gave him a cool order.

"Go across to that chemist's and get a roll of bandage, quick."

Quickly Billy obeyed. Returning with the bandage, he asked a few questions of the driver of the wagon, dismissed him, and then, turning to that kneeling figure, pointed to his car, and said: "Lift him in there, won't you?"

In half a minute the Banshee was driving up to the Infirmary.

Because she had only been in training for so very short a time, the ex-Girton girl had not yet reached the professional nurse's cheerful and effectual detachment in a moment of stress. Tense anxiety was written on Lorne's face, bent above the child (who sobbed less from pain than from fright, and less from fright than from a sense of self-importance).

"Much hurt?" murmured Billy, over the wheel.

Lorne shook her head to show that she didn't know.

"I shall have to wait until we get to the Infirmary."

At the Infirmary, Billy said: "I may wait?"

After a second's hesitation, she said, "Yes." In

a very short time she came out again, leading the pacified little boy by the hand.

Billy suddenly noticed that she had got rather thinner since she had left Ditchwater. Or else it was that the trim blue uniform, with its badges, made her smaller, neater, younger than she had seemed in the floppy, aristocratic clothes she used to wear.

Smiling down at the child, she said: "He is all right. Will you drive him home, Mr. Somers? I'll tell you the address."

The acutely embarrassed Billy said: "May I drive you home, too?"

He had not expected that she would say "Yes"—but she did.

On the road to the Deanery (after the child had been put down at the little shop where he lived) there was a short, agonising silence, into which Billy dropped a remark or so about the fearful state of the Ditchwater roads since the lorries had come down.

"Do you think the war is going to last long?" Lorne asked.

Then, before he could answer this stereotyped question she went on, hurriedly, blushing very much.

"I really let you drive me home because I wanted to say something——"

Billy thought: "Oh, Lord, what will it be?"

She said, very gently: "Thank you for writing

back to me. It was a—a nice note.” Then, with a glance at Billy’s sorry and set young profile, she added, almost cheerfully: “Please don’t mind about it any more. It’s quite all right.”

Billy, his eyes on the road ahead, growled: “Frightfully sweet of you to say so.”

She felt for the moment uplifted, apart, not unlike the young nun who sends back her last glance through the grille. “You know, I’m entirely wrapped up in my nursing now,” she told him.

Billy didn’t know what to say to this gentle creature whom he’d treated so badly—how he’d come to do it, he didn’t know! Still, he had jilted her, apparently . . . so on he drove, in silence. Being a man, he did not guess at what lay beyond that bright, calm interest of her manner; namely, a devotion that he would get nowhere else.

Remember! It was now weeks ago since that morning that the Dean’s daughter had last caught a glimpse of his careless, boy’s figure and shining head; and that with every moment of those weeks of absence their image had grown dearer to her. Dearer, partly because it was out of her reach forever; partly because there was no chance to correct, from the flaws in the living model, the super-loveliness of that image as it engraved itself upon her heart.

I even think that if all those weeks had been passed at home in a conventional and happy engagement

to Mr. Billy Somers, those more intense feelings of Lorne's might never have been awakened. As it was, her imaginings had built up for her, upon a foundation of the very little she'd seen of her defaulting suitor, an Ideal who would hardly be shifted from his shrine by any near flesh-and-blood young man. She was now desperately in love; but with whom? With a Billy who never was on land or sea. It is a fate of too many faithful-hearted spinsters; it is a type of love affair that there's very little hope of a girl's getting over. These poor, poor Miss Petrarchs with their Laurences! . . . A cynic would say that the one and only cure is for the girl to marry her model—and this was out of the question for Lorne Halliday. She had heard days ago that her Billy was to be another's, and she thought that she knew, now, the whole of the reason why he had never come to the Deanery again after that one, tense, never-to-be-forgotten evening.

At the Deanery gate the girl in her new uniform shook hands with the young man in his already worn khaki; and jumped down from the car.

"I hope you'll be very happy," she said, smiling pluckily up at him. "I always thought Miss Goosey was lovely; just like a Greuze. Good-bye!"

CHAPTER XIX

AS it happened, that amateur performance of the revue, "By Numbers," got up at The Retreat, affected almost everybody in this story.

First of all, it affected the Hallidays directly, because the proceeds were in aid of the Dean's great interest, the Y.M.C.A. tent; so the Dean, of course, was bound to go to the performance. If it hadn't been for Billy Somers, the Dean's wife and daughter would also have gone, as a matter of course.

But all Ditchwater knew that Mr. Billy Somers was engaged to Miss Lily Goosey and that he would naturally be there. The Hallidays knew that Mr. Billy Somers had been engaged at the same time, even if only for a few hours, to their daughter.

So the following discussion arose between the Dean and his wife: "I could wish that there were no necessity for me to be present at the performance at all," pronounced the Dean, standing on the hearthrug in his dim study, his stately silver head backed by a dark steel engraving of "*The Man with the Muck-Rake*" above the mantelpiece. "I—ah—could wish never again to set eyes upon this—this philanderer, or any of these—er—wealthy people with whom he has now elected to throw in his lot. Had it not been,

Adela, that these theatricals were in aid of an object more worthy than the methods by which—er—money is being raised to help us.”

The timid voice of the Dean's wife put in: “Yes; but was *their* idea that the money should go towards the tent, Horace? And if you don't go, I am afraid it would look as if—as if you thought something were *odd*.”

The Dean threw her, across the study table, a look of affectionate and lofty compassion. “Odd? A singularly inadequate expression, my dear, to apply to my sentiments towards this ignoble——”

“I know. But I am afraid you will have to go, Horace,” said the Dean's wife, flutteringly. “Of course, you will have to go alone.”

“You do not intend to come, Adela?”

“How can I, dear? Everybody knows that Lorne is down, and it would look so odd——”

“‘*Again the cousin's whistle,*’” quoted the Dean, bitterly, balancing himself on his toes and letting himself slowly down again. “Women seem to have no standard of conduct, apart from what other people may consider ‘odd.’”

“But they would!” sighed Mrs. Halliday, persistently. “They know Lorne is here and that I should not leave her all alone for the evening. It would not seem so odd,” she added, fidgeting with her little key basket, “if Lorne stayed at home with me, on account of my headache.”

The Dean looked at her. "You have a headache, my dear?"

"I—I think I soon shall have," said the Dean's wife, with great mildness. "At any rate, I think it will be quite understood, if I stay at home that evening, doing the Cottage Hospital Report, with Lorne." Lorne at that moment opened the study door and came in. Evidently she had just heard of the revue; it was the first thing she spoke of.

"Oh, Mother dear, about this play at the Gooseys' on Thursday night," she said, quite casually, "how are we going to get up there?"

A silence. Then the Dean spoke, slowly. "We were just speaking of it, Lorne. We have decided that it will not be necessary for you or for your mother to appear. I—" he drew himself up and turned his fine old side face to "*The Man with the Muck-Rake*"—"I shall go alone—er—by myself. I shall be able to explain."

"Oh! Why, Father?" asked Lorne. "I should like to go."

It was quite true. A young man in Lorne's place would probably wish to destroy all memories and avoid all sight of the lost Beloved. Certainly he would not put himself in the way of beholding that Beloved with the Rival, in all his glory. But a girl crossed in love is so different, so much more given to encouraging that which wounds herself. "*Oh, for a*

thorn to put my breast against, like a nightingale!" . . . Perhaps Lorne's mother understood this. With a little jingle of her keys she drew nearer to her daughter, as she ventured a soft, "Oh, don't you think the other would be better, Lorne?" Quite serenely, Lorne slipped her hand into Mrs. Halliday's arm. "But if you mean Mr. Somers, Mother, that will be quite, quite all right. I don't mind meeting him. Besides, if he goes out to France, naturally he would be the first person I should run across when I got there. At least, he would be, if all this were in a story," she added, with a little laugh; but probably the other woman understood that this was all the girl dreamed of nowadays, to get out to some base hospital and to have Billy, not too badly wounded, brought into her ward. Ah, if he is not to be mine to love, let him be mine to nurse! is the eternal woman's cry. . . . She went on, turning from her mother to her father: "Anyhow, I have met him. I met him this morning, and, really, it was quite all right." And she told the story of the street accident and of the drive in Mr. Somers' car. The Dean wished very fervently that this meeting had not taken place. He also considered that another meeting would be very ill-advised.

"The child is very generous," he said to his wife, speaking a little shakily, across Lorne. "I do not—cannot yet find it in me to be so—ah—so forgiving. I regret to say that I—ah—" He pressed his lips

together, then added something almost inaudible about "heartless trifling."

"Don't, don't!" broke in Lorne, quickly, colouring all over her face, that had become such a much more slender oval since the night that Billy Somers had kissed it at the dance. "Father, please don't say anything about 'heartlessness.' It wasn't that, you see."

Up went the Dean's silver eyebrows. "Not heartless? How else describe the conduct of a man who engaged the affections of a young girl, who proposes marriage to her one day, and who, the very next day——"

Lorne interposed. "It was all a mistake, Father. A—a stupid mistake—of *mine*," she added, with a little gulp that swallowed down—Heaven alone knew how many—camel loads of inherited principles and of careful upbringing, as well as the "side" Miss Halliday had once taken so fluently in an inter-college debate upon "*Can Any Reversion of Truth be Justifiable?*" She didn't care whether it was justifiable or not; she had to defend Billy. "I owe it to my pride to be able to meet——"

"We'll *all* go," said Mrs. Halliday, greatly daring.

They all went.

Now, Nora Wynne-Pritchard and her *flancé*, Captain Hunter, hadn't the least intention of going. Their reasons for not going the M.O. set forth at

considerable length. "It would be doubly an insult to you, dearest, and to your people and all your hospitality. I feel that I haven't expressed myself half strongly enough about that sister of mine and her behaviour. I can hardly believe it even yet," he went on, glibly. They were sitting alone together in the drawing room before tea. "To come to your house, to treat it as—as a jumping-off ground!"

Nora, rather uncomfortably: "Oh, it wasn't as bad as all that. It was only a little bit casual, perhaps, to father and mother."

"Ah, you're too kind," murmured Rex Hunter. "You always are, Nora. Except to me," he added, with a little sigh. "You were rather cruel to your lover this afternoon——"

"Please don't begin that again," Nora begged him, impatiently.

"I only came up behind you to kiss that adorable little place on the back of your neck, and you flew out at me like a little wildcat."

"Well, you shouldn't have startled me so. I wasn't prepared for it," retorted the *fiancée*.

"Are you prepared for it *now*?" he asked, softly, bending over her. She moved away—she was constantly moving away these days—and said: "Let's settle this about the revue to-night. All the maids are going, of course; we had to take tickets for them, because it's for the Dean. Father and mother would like me to stay at home with them, I know;

they see so little of me, really, now. But you, Rex—you *ought* to go to see your sister act!"

Nora did not know that Rex had done something only the day before which put any such idea out of his mind. He began to discuss his sister's behaviour again, almost as if he were exalting himself at Nellie's expense.

"You're making quite the most of what Nellie did," said Nora, turning that wilful little black head of hers and looking pitilessly away over her *flancé's* shoulder, instead of into the dark eyes with which he was trying to master her. "But you don't try to please me by doing what I ask. Go up to the Gooseys' this evening."

"If you want to get rid of me—" he began, with tenderest reproach, and paused. Not a word from Nora. He rose.

"If you want to get rid of me, I'll go away," he said. (Going away is often the best policy, as he knew.) "I won't come to-night, I promise you," he added, gently, looking down at the delicious, obstinate little creature. ("You wait until you're married to me, then you'll be only too dam' frightened to let me out of your sight," he thought.) "I'll go and have a lonely walk, or something. But I'm not going to the revue—without *you*, dearest."

So it was arranged that none of *them* should go.

As for Billy, he was going. More, he was taking with him a small packet that he had pulled out of a

drawer in his quarters. It was fastened up and addressed to Glitters, the London jewellers; for it was the packet that he had been going to post on that afternoon that he had met Nora with the M.O. in Love Lane and had had the news of their engagement sprung upon him like a mine. (After which our young man had again forgotten about such things as packets to post.) Now he meant to ask Lily Goosey, after the show, which of these three engagement rings in that packet she would care to wear. He meant to get that over. It was not a question whether he wanted to see his pearls or his diamonds or his emeralds on Lily's finger; not a question of whether she would rather wear his ring than that of any other man in the world. It was not a question of all that wearing that ring implied—not a question of well or ill mating, of firesides warm or cold which they must henceforward share between them, of affection growing or waning, of passion dead or comradeship kindled, of understanding or estrangement for the rest of their lives, of all that makes the mystery of marriage. It was none of these, of course.

Billy was simply "fed"—fed with the whole anomalous position. The little thing was pretty enough. No doubt it would all turn out as well as lots of fellows' marriages. He remembered a remark he'd once heard from a cynic (at Sandhurst): "Any girl is the wrong girl after you've married

her." If Nora was beyond his reach, where was his choice? Yes; he'd get the job over.

Two days before this, in a painfully prim drawing room in Kensington, the wife of Jim Hallett the Adjutant sat writing. She was staying as a paying guest with aunts—now that her home was broken up and Jim was "somewhere in France"—aunts who considered that she couldn't be very anxious about Jim, seeing that she still spent far too much money on new shoes, still made flippant jokes, still seemed to write letters to quite other young men than her husband. The letter she was writing now seemed to cause her some amusement. She nibbled the end of her pen, smiled, leant back. The long screed that Billy Somers had sent to her was in front of her. She looked at it again, this time laughing outright, to the scandal of an aunt knitting in a corner. "Poor Proposing Prodigy!" said Mrs. Hallett, aloud. Suddenly she reached for the A. B. C. She told herself: "After all, I've got the agent to see again about letting that little house, and I should have to go soon. May as well kill as many birds with one stone as possible. I might even go to the Goosey Pantomime that he talks about; Jim would love an account of that."

So Jim's wife tore up her letter of advice to Billy and sent off a wire to the Sportsman Hotel at Ditchwater, asking them to reserve a room for her.

"Pa" Goosey had promised his flock of own

daughters and adopted sons that he would give a look-in for a moment at their revue, if he could make the time. He was shut into his own newly organised office at The Retreat, right away from the clatter and bustle of the rehearsals, hard by the telephone that rang all day without ceasing, and up to his delighted eyes in the work of correcting the specification for the 'uts.

In the more strictly military sense, the old Colonel was left alone in Ditchwater to conduct the war. He smiled under his White-Knightly moustache as he determined to conduct it.

CHAPTER XX

THERE was a sound of revelry by night. The most successful amateur revue in which Miss Nellie Hunter (as she appeared on the programme) had ever taken part was nearly over.

Half-a-dozen variously splendid curtains from different parts of Mr. Goosey's mansion separated the still applauding audience in the larger half of the huge drawing room from the "behind the scenes" where the eight sisters Goosey were twittering and giggling in whispers as they took their places for their star turn. Young Mrs. Milbanke, in her scarlet *vivandière* kit, brushed past the bevy of girls, parted two of the curtains with her fingers, peeped through the crack, and wondered who was the woman in the second row to whom that good-looking boy, Somers, was talking so earnestly. Mrs. Milbanke was sure she had heard a laugh and a "Don't be a fool, Billy!" from the woman; but whether or not young Somers was going to be a fool, he was certainly not laughing. Just in front of him was the Deanery party, with Miss Halliday in uniform. Further down were all the mammas and aunts of Ditchwater, and all the young soldiers who weren't in the revue.

Nellie felt a touch on her shoulder. It was Mr. Orpington ("Buff" Orpington), the subaltern impresario, lanky, lantern-jawed, whose flows of gags and wheezes had been what Mamma Goosey had called "the life and soul of the party."

"Come on! It's gone a treat, so far. Out of the way, please," he muttered. "Let's ring up for the finale. Now——"

A minute later the swaying line of particoloured curtains had been drawn to right and left, and the audience was gazing over the row of footlights that had been fixed by the Ditchwater electrician, at the *pièce de résistance* of the evening; the All-Goosey Goosé-step. It was based on that dance of Miss Unity Moore's, in the then so popular "Business as Usual," but Mr. Orpington had revised it. Loud applause broke out at the sight of that graduated line of absurdly pretty yellow-headed girls, all in white, with golden shoes upon their minute feet, all with their toes turned well in. The shortest, Beryl, stood on the extreme left, and so on, up through Vera, Ethel, Gladys, Babs, Phyllis, and Mabel to Lily, the tallest, on the extreme right. Lily's flush of excitement glowed through her rouge; her great Saxe-blue eyes shone even more enormous because of the cobalt make-up on their innocent lids. She smiled with two rows of even pearls, not at the audience (as Mrs. Hallett noticed from her seat beside Lily's *flancé*), but into the wings where Mr. Orping-

ton, who was prompter, as well as stage-manager and everything else, stood with a prompt copy in his hand.

Two sharp raps on the back of her fiddle by one of the three amateur "violins"; the "piano" (Miss Rogers, of the tea shop) struck a loud and joyous chord.

Then, from the Goosey girls, the results were to be seen of weeks of Mr. Orpington's admirably patient drill. Eight small right hands went up simultaneously! Simultaneously eight small right hands came down. Eight sets of tiny toes were turned further in at exactly the right angle, and there was not a hairbreadth of difference in that well-rehearsed waddle across the stage.

In perfect unison the eight bird-like sopranos trilled out:

*"But there's one kind of step that they will learn
from Tommy Atkins,
It's the quick-step back to Germanee!" . . .*

Mrs. Hallett, who missed so little that went on, certainly did not miss all that this remarkable unanimity implied. In the other acts she had noticed glances between the Tallest Goose (as the Belgian Maid) and the stage-manager (as the Knutty Kneutral), and she could guess what had preceded those. Heads together over pianos; rap-

turous giggles of "Oh, no; *I've* got an idea! This would be better!" theatricals discussed at breakfast, luncheon, tea, dinner, and in between meals; the Goosé-step and how to improve it the subject of dreams by night. Mrs. Hallett had got up private theatricals with young men in her time. . . . *She* saw.

But not so Mr. Billy Somers, in whose tunic pocket there lay those three engagement rings. Billy in full marching kit—greatcoat, haversack, holster, water bottle, and all—had never felt so burdened as he felt with those three little velvet boxes in the right-hand pocket of his jacket.

For some time during this dance that was to follow the performance he had resolved to take that Goosey girl now strutting on the extreme right of the line of other Goosey girls, and sit out with her, and offer her her choice; pearls or diamonds or—emeralds.

Then he'd be in it up to his neck; and no getting out of it, either. Into those gloomy thoughts Mrs. Hallett's whisper intruded.

"I say, your Lily's blossomed out quite a lot since I saw her," she murmured, with a quiet meaning; but Billy only gave an absent, depressed nod. There he sat, gloomily watching that white-and-golden line of wife-and-sisters-in-law-to-be. At every fresh inturn of their toes every one else shrieked with laughter. Billy thought he'd never seen any-

thing so idiotic! Their "idiocy" had reached the height of all idiocy possible, amidst thunderous applause, the curtains came together with a little clash of rings, and the revue was over.

Again the curtains parted; while the "Geese" ducked and smiled, again and again.

Then the eight girls broke the chain, and with a fluttering, a cackling, and a twinkling of sixteen white ankles and sixteen golden shoes they stepped down over the footlights and in amongst the audience. Young Orpington's loud, authoritative voice was heard.

"Platform party! . . . 'Shun. . . . Carry on! . . . Now, you fellows with the chairs. O.I.C. lights here? Come on, clear away. . . . Out of the way, everybody else, please! Ten—minutes—inter—val!"

In ten minutes the big drawing room was cleared. The pianist returned to her piano, the fiddlers stood with poised bows, and a waltz broke out.

People began to take their partners.

As soon as Billy Somers heard the first bar of that waltz tune an odd shiver went down his straight back.

For it was a tune almost dead as I write these words, but a tune then in its vogue; it was "Destiny."

Billy smiled crookedly at the irony of it. Destiny,

indeed, with those rings feeling as heavy as three four-pound dumb-bells in his pocket! Destiny! Only a few weeks before he had prepared to dance to that same tune, but what, what a difference between this impromptu frisk and that last regimental dance of the Loamshires!

What a difference between *those* days, when there had been no thought of happenings darker than Mess bills and card bills to pay (and very little money to do it on!) and *these* when, as a background to any frolicking, there was the unforgettable thought of "out there." What a difference (Billy thought) between the perfectly swung floor of that marquee, that had answered to the light tread of his pals (the fellows in scarlet-and-black) and this parquet floor in a civilian house, where romped these boys in training, wearing the only uniform they had ever known—khaki.

It was the difference between peace and war, with the strains of "Destiny" over all.

It also reminded Billy, by the way, of the way in which he had made a bigger idiot of himself than ever in his life before by proposing three times over.

Even as he thought this, he found Lorne Halliday at his side again. Lorne, as well as Mrs. Hallett, had divined that Billy was in the dumps. To help and comfort would have been Heaven to Lorne. After all, they *had* spoken and got the ice broken. After all, she had told her people that there was no

reason why she should *not* see Mr. Somers. What was the good of being half-hearted about it? . . .

She smiled calmly up at Billy. "You haven't asked me to dance, Mr. Somers," she said, as if casually.

Now, Billy, considering himself responsible for Mrs. Hallett, naturally asked her for the first dance. But Mrs. Hallett, passing at that moment a knot of people, told him that she had old friends to talk to and wouldn't dance.

That left Billy only one thing to do. He turned to Lorne Halliday. They were standing near the open doorway of the big room.

"Give me this, won't you?" he said, glancing down at her, almost appealingly; he certainly looked miserable, as Lorne saw, smiling at him with a woman's heart in her dark eyes. Mrs. Hallett, chatting to her friends, glanced back and thought, "How right the Greeks were to settle, once for all, that the little wretch must be blind. If our Mormon could only care for poor Lorne! He's speaking to her almost as if——"

And even as Billy spoke to Lorne there appeared at the open doorway an apparition.

An apparition of contrast!

For all the revue performers were waving the garish costumes they had worn during their last scene. Nellie Milbanke had her distinctly daring *vivandière* get-up; the All-Goosey cast had their

white-and-gold; Mr. Orpington was in his "Little Willie" disguise; others in Belgian or tricolour draperies, in tinsel and tulle flutterations of every colour of the rainbow. The Ditchwater residents appeared, to a dowager, in evening dress (with appropriate egrets and wisps of crochet). Ma Goosey, looking literally like four of her own daughters rolled into one, was a sumptuous vision in black-and-glitters; Lorne had her dainty uniform—but what Billy saw was that little figure of the apparition. A supple little figure that might have come straight on from a day with the otter hounds, in tweeds, a Burberry hat, and small, sturdy brogues. To Billy she was all the hills and all the heather, all the brooks and all the bogs, all the grey-blue Heaven, and all the happiness out o' doors in the land he would have loved because it could produce a girl like Nora.

Nora! Here?

Yes; Nora Wynne-Pritchard was here; and not only was she here, but she had arrived just in time to hear him ask Lorne Halliday for that dance, while the music played "Destiny."

They were playing "Destiny." . . .

Ah, these "popular" tunes, whose life is for a few months only, how they fill and dominate these months while their vogue is on! To their recurrent melodies are set every glance, every thrill, every

hope, and every heartbreak at every dance or restaurant or theatre where youth and pleasure meet. "Oh, good! They're going to play So-and-so." Poor tunes! Their fate, even a year later, is to evoke the shrug and the: "Oh, that *ancient* thing! More back numbers!" Where are the tunes of yesteryear?

Who remembers the "Mabel" waltz? Who thinks to-day of humming "Love's Old Sweet Song" or "Myosotis"? (Yet these had their triumph. Their simple rhythm pulsed with the kisses of a generation dead.) Even the "Valse Bleue," "Estudiantina," and "The Merry Widow" are one with Nineveh and Tyre. They will be one, also, with "Destiny"—

Of course, even in the hall, Nora, too, had heard the strains of that waltz, the very tune that she had danced to with Billy Somers, just before he had proposed to her.

Through her mind, too, there flashed that same difference—the difference between that dance when she accepted the proposal of the fair-haired lad she loved and this one to which she (the *flancée* of another man) had only come on a matter of extreme urgency. There had been nobody else to bring the telegram which she now held in her hand.

But for a moment the seductive drawl of that waltz tune put even the telegram out of the girl's mind. She had arrived, and stood there, framed in

the doorway, just in time to hear Billy Somers ask Lorne Halliday for that dance. Lorne, whom he had cruelly jilted. Lorne, who had left her home because of him—Lorne seemed to be on perfectly friendly terms with him! She was evidently going to give him the dance! But as the tune caught other dancers and sped them round the room, Billy Somers' eyes met Nora's, fixed themselves upon her face as if they could not leave it.

There was an appeal in Billy's gaze, and misery, and——

But what did Nora care what else there was?

Deep in her stormy little breast anger and contempt were warring.

Also that form of hatred for men which is born of too much love for one particular man.

Her Rex was bad enough, irritating enough, too demonstrative, too—everything! But, at least, he didn't play with hearts for the fun of it, as this Mr. Somers seemed ready to do at any moment. Engaged to that buttercup-haired Goosey girl! And now philandering again with Lorne! And even when she, Nora, had announced her own engagement he had pretended to *mind*; he had said he wished he were out in France getting shot! *What* did he mean by it all——

Suddenly her heart echoed the desperate cry that had been wrung from young Billy himself. "Oh, what does it matter? What does anything matter

now? Let's get it *over!*" and through the throb of the music she thought: "I don't suppose Rex will be much worse than any one else." Then she remembered her telegram; she remembered how she had cut Billy Somers once before, it didn't matter if she cut him again. She smiled eagerly and brightly and away from him, and put out her hand to the girl beside him in the doorway. "Oh, Lorne! I know your partner will excuse me—I can't come in—there was nobody else in the house to bring it. *Would* you mind giving this telegram to Mrs. Milbanke . . . there she is, there, in the scarlet stockings!"

At that moment a hurried voice interrupted at her elbow. The voice of Mrs. Hallett. "Let me take it, Nora. And then wait a minute—wait in the hall. I must see you before you go. Did you come on your bicycle? Yes. Don't—don't go."

She took the telegram. Nora, with never another glance at the dancers, turned into the hall.

Billy, hauling himself, as it were, out of a trance, turned again to Lorne. "Well, shall we dance?" he said.

With one girl's ring in his pocket, with another girl's scornful image stamped on his heart, Billy put his arm about the slim, uniformed waist of the third girl, and they danced.

Lorne, to whom that one waltz would remain more sacred than ten years of married life to another type of woman, vowed to herself: "This is the last

for me. I'll never dance with anybody after this; it would be like coming down from Heaven into a ward kitchen!" Her wistful, anemic face glowed. . . .

Before the Dean's carriage was announced she had her one perfect moment.

Some of us do not have even that. . . .

Now Nora had flung herself down on a priceless and age-old oaken settee lately acquired by Mr. Goosey for his hall, to wait. She was full of measureless disdain for a whole sex. For days now she had chafed over her own appalling blunder in agreeing to marry Rex Hunter. She knew now that she didn't want to marry anybody, ever. Men? Bah! All airs and heavy hoofs. She watched these men here, dancing past the open doorway like figures that danced by on the cinema screen. How *could* people take them more seriously? There went that lanky comedian, tricked out in his pale-blue uniform as "Little Willie" into whose face, as they danced, Lily Goosey was gazing up, shiningly interested in every word he said.

She was the sort of girl who thought that anything a man said was interesting; therefore the sort of girl in whom all men were interested. They would be. There went the fat Mr. Williams; *could* anybody love him? Could his mother even? There went the little boy with a face like a curate; would they really put him in command of soldiers? Was the whole

world mad? thought Nora, watching, altogether out of tune while that waltz drawled on. . . .

There—ah, yes, there came Billy Somers and Lorne Halliday again. Billy with a polite and set grin on his face (*Rotter!*), Lorne with her face averted as they circled. Nora envied Lorne, who could take up a career and be satisfied with that (as Lorne had written to her).

But the doorway hanging hid Mrs. Hallett, for whom Nora was waiting.

Nora tapped her foot; she wished she would hurry up.

Then she saw them crossing the room, Nellie Milbanke in her scarlet *vivandière* get-up, almost dragging Mrs. Hallett behind her. Mrs. Milbanke ran across the hall to Nora.

"Oh, when did this come?" she cried, excitedly, waving the telegram. "Oh, I say, isn't it awful? You opened it, didn't you? No?" She thrust the telegram upon Nora, who read:

"Return at once am ill James."

"Isn't it the limit? Isn't it like James?" she went on, past all composure. "Getting ill now, and the show on again to-morrow night! Really, I do have too much to put up with. I can't get home to-night," she stormed as if defending herself. "It'll have to be the eight-thirty to-morrow morning—

beastly nuisance! However, I shall get up in time——”

Here a loud and jovial voice sounded behind her. It was Mr. Goosey in a dinner jacket, his shirt crumpled and bulging out of his waistcoat; his collar damp with the efforts of his evening's work over those 'uts.

“What's this, what's this?” he boomed. “Eight-thirty? We aren't going to bed till eight-thirty, G.M. I 'aven't begun yet. 'Ere I've been toiling and moiling, to keep the 'ome and the few sticks together, all evening, and you grudge me my little bit o' dancing. Now which of you girls speaks first for a dance with dad? Come on, Nellie——”

Here Mrs. Hallett interposed, explaining for the almost hysterical Mrs. Milbanke.

“Dear, dear, dear!” the old man said, sympathetically. “Still, my motto is, always sleep over it. That'll be all right. You shall have the car at seven in the morning, if you like, get you down quicker than the train. 'Ere! Vera——” he called, as a stray Gosling tripped by, “just you run along and tell your ma to come 'ere, quick.” He turned to Mrs. Milbanke again. “Ma'll fix you up with something better than smelling salts. Now, Mother! Just you go and mix one of my specials for this young lady. You know where they are.”

Two minutes later, Mrs. Milbanke was looking greatly revived and Vera was taking away a port

glass that had held a generous liqueur. During this interval the tweed-clad Nora would have slipped away had it not been that Mrs. Hallett had said she particularly wished to see her. But Nora now thought that Mrs. Hallett's message, whatever it was, could not have been so important after all. For Mr. Goosey, beholding for the first time the tweed-clad apparition, shot out both his hands towards it, and again burst forth:

"Well, this is 'Ooameley! Come in just as ye are—" with a glance at the tweeds and brogues—"Liberty 'All! That's the style! I'm right glad to see you. Let me see; it—it's Miss Wynne-Pritchard, isn't it? The Major's young lady. That's right (*crescendo*). No! You're not going off. You're going to give me a dance (*fortissimo*) before you leave this 'ouse! What's your 'urry? . . . Not going out of this 'ouse before you've 'ad your dance with father! Now, there's a sports-woman; come on——"

Nora, half helplessly laughing, found herself capering away to the strains of "Any Old Night is a Wonderful Night"—steered by Papa Goosey of all people! And how did he dance? Why just as so many of these gross, red-faced, stentorian-voiced, material-looking men do dance; namely, as smoothly as a bubble on a wave, as lightly as a piece of thistledown on a summer breeze!

And it was here that Mrs. Hallett, observing Nora

safe in those efficient-looking and masterful, plump hands, deemed it safe to obliterate herself again for the present.

"*What* do mothers of daughters do?" she asked herself as she snatched a moment to powder her nose. "The love affairs of other people's children are quite exhausting enough for me! . . . Now, where is young Billy?"

Young Billy had seen Lorne Halliday into the bosom of her departing family again, and then, in his search for a spot in which to be alone, had given up the staircase as being full of Goslings and New subalterns, also the arranged sitting-out places. He had wandered to the deserted buffet near the conservatory.

The boy was utterly unnerved.

Half an hour before it had not seemed such an undertaking, just to hand Lily Goosey a ring . . . it had seemed all part and parcel of this dashed business. Now it seemed suddenly impossible again. All because there had appeared in a doorway, to the strains of "Destiny," that maddeningly provocative face of Nora! He knew that he loved her; that he must always love her. . . . What a Hades of a prospect!

And perhaps even yet, if he had an hour alone in which to talk to her in peace, he might manage to oust that fellow Hunter. . . .

But Billy had a code; that distracting masculine

code by which men earn a certain measure (not too large a measure!) of women's respect, and by which they wreck so much of women's happiness every now and then.

He was "in honour bound." He had been asked up to this house as Lily's *flancé*. He'd been congratulated by his Colonel and his Mess. Thank Heaven he'd no people but a distant ex-guardian from whom to suffer good wishes! He had let it go on and on until everybody in the neighbourhood knew he was officially engaged to Miss Lily Goosey. Heaps of the girl's friends must have considered it rather strange that he hadn't yet given her a ring. He'd come to this blithering party that night for that very purpose. Well, he must do it. But what cursed Spite had brought *his* One Girl in the World there that night?

Into his morose brooding among fruit salads and the "cups" there drifted the voice of his friend Jim's wife.

"Hullo, Billy," Mrs. Hallett began; "enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, rather," said Billy, grimly. (Hadn't she eyes in her head?)

"That's right," said Mrs. Hallett, serenely looking about. Nobody there but a bored-looking butler. She dropped into a chair by a small table. "Do get me a whiskey-and-soda, also a cigarette. Also get yourself a chair, my dear boy; I can't talk

looking up at an Eddystone lighthouse. All comfy? Now, let's talk. How are things? About your long, miserable letter, Billy. . . . We haven't had time for more than ten words yet, you know——"

But more than those ten words were not to be spoken between Billy and his *confidante*, the Adjutant's wife, that night. If they had had the heart-to-heart talk that she had arranged, many things might have simplified. For Jim Hallett's wife, leg-puller and mocking-bird as she was, was still a very kind-hearted woman, and very fond of this big boy in trouble. So she would hardly have been able to keep herself from telling him frankly two things that she had noticed to-night. One was that he need have little compunction about his *fiancée*, Miss Lily Goosey. If he (Billy) failed her, the Lily of the Valley was only too ready to find consolation with another young man.

The other was that Miss Nora Wynne-Pritchard, the betrothed of Captain Hunter, could only have become engaged to the brother of such a truly awful sister because she (Nora) was feeling desperate herself! And why should she feel (and look) so desperate, unless she was still in love with her first sweetheart, Billy Somers?

All this was what Mrs. Hallett would have told him for his comfort, had she been allowed another minute with the young man. As it was, this was the precise moment at which one of the Goslings bore down upon

her with the news that Miss Wynne-Pritchard was looking for Mrs. Hallett, as she'd finished her dance with Pa and she thought she ought to go.

Mrs. Hallett sped quickly away. Billy was left. He marched up to the buffet.

"Black coffee, sir?" said the Gooseys' butler.

"No. Champagne," said Billy, who felt he really needed it to hearten him up for what he had to do next.

Nora Wynne-Pritchard was waiting for Mrs. Hallett in a small cloakroom off the hall, full of Goosey mackintoshes and minute Goosey gumboots; also umbrellas. She waited here because it was nearer the door, and she longed to be out of that door, and away. She was flushed from that dance, which she had enjoyed in spite of herself; the way of youth, with the thriving young body ever ready to triumph over the dumps of mind! But she wasn't prepared to stay on and see any more of this affair. . . . Billy would be dancing with his absurdly pretty *fiancée*, she knew. And that she felt she would not enjoy. . . .

The slim, black-clad figure of Mrs. Hallett came in, quickly. There was none of the mischief on her face which she had shown to Billy Somers. She put her hand on Nora's arm.

"I did so want to talk to you," she said, the music of the lancers sounding through her voice. "Shall

we sit down here?" She patted the little, low form where the Goosey girls put on their goloshes. Then as she cautiously pulled the door to behind her, and turning out the light, she glanced at Nora's face.

That glance told the older woman that if she plunged straight into what she wanted to say, there was some danger that the touchy, mettlesome little Celt, "fed up" with all men in general and with one young man in particular, would be up and off and away on her bicycle. On the other hand, time was short, and Billy might be involving himself even deeper in his idiotic engagement at any moment.

Hurriedly, Mrs. Hallett began: "I wish I'd known you better when I was down here, Nora. I don't think I've ever seen you to speak to alone; just at these Ditchwater tea fights, and the tennis club, and all that sort of thing." Then, to herself: "If I *could* stop Billy giving the actual ring to that pretty village idiot before he's made it up with this other child!" Then, to Nora: "You see, I'm so afraid of putting my foot into it."

"Putting your foot into what?" asked Nora, politely, gazing at the umbrellas.

"Into anybody else's affairs," said Mrs. Hallett, modestly. "I mean yours, you know."

Nora said, quite shortly: "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Mrs. Hallett then proceeded in that golosh-scented

cloakroom, to the sound of distant music and of flying feet, to take the bull by the horns.

"I wanted," she said, looking straight into the proud little face beside her, "to talk to you about a friend of mine. A man whose heart you are breaking. You know who it is: Mr. Somers."

Then she held her breath. It was touch and go whether or not Nora Wynne-Pritchard would get up from that bench without another word, would open the door and march out of that lobby to her bicycle, waiting amidst a pack of cars outside.

But—well, perhaps Nora recognised the real, anxious friendliness on the married woman's face. Perhaps, since she was a Celt and superstitious, she believed in a kind of Luck that had brought her there that night. Perhaps, crushed and stamped down, daily, there yet survived in her heart a little dogged hope that some day she would hear something that might explain the whole affair of Billy Somers. She looked at Mrs. Hallett. She had always liked the Adjutant's wife in those careless, prewar days. And, without moving from the bench, she said, quite simply: "Mrs. Hallett, I believe you mean to be kind. But whatever you say about—about that friend of yours, it can't make any difference."

"Let me say it, anyhow," pleaded Billy's *confidante*. "I am unhappy about him, you know. Jim was fond of him, and so am I. Of course you know

he's engaged. But—he is absolutely miserable,” said Mrs. Hallett.

“I am sorry,” said Nora, icily, and with an inward gush of pleasure. Billy was really miserable? Really, after all?

“He doesn't care,” enlarged Mrs. Hallett, “what happens to him now. He's told me so. The boy is wretched. Wretched. And you know it.”

“It has nothing to do with me whether Mr. Somers is wretched or happy,” said Nora, trying not to feel so ridiculously cheered.

“It has everything to do with you,” persisted the other woman. “It is because of you that he is simply throwing himself away.”

The music stopped; shrieks of “Encore! 'Core!” sounded from the ballroom.

Nora said, in a voice as even as possible: “He is engaged to that awfully pretty girl. Everybody knows that.”

“Do you suppose he cares a button about *her*?”

“Of course I suppose so. Why else is a man engaged to a girl?” enquired Nora, virtuously. “Obviously he's in love with Miss Goosey.”

“I don't believe that you think so, for a single minute,” insisted Mrs. Hallett, who felt she could have slapped her. “Do you know that to-night is the first night he's been up to the place, since this absurd ‘engagement’ of his? Do you know he's not

even had time to bring her a ring yet? All these weeks, and he's never given her a ring!"

Nora looked at her own ring: Rex's rather ostentatious sapphire set in brilliants. . . .

"Casual of him," said she.

"He means to give her one to-night, poor boy," added Mrs. Hallett. "No doubt he wishes to goodness he could pitch it out of the window instead. He had it in his pocket at the show, he told me."

"Did he?" said Nora, lightly, turning her tip-tilted, rebellious little profile against a white mackintosh of her host's, hung up behind her. It looked big enough to use as a tarpaulin for a hayrick, Mrs. Hallett thought. Nora waited for Mrs. Hallett to go on about the ring that Billy wished he could pitch out of the window. Mrs. Hallett thought, "Now let her wait a bit."

Both waited. The last figure of the lancers, encored, had ended. Voices sounded in the hall outside the door. The clear, bubbling soprano of Lily—or Vera—or Elsie? rang out and died away. . . .

In spite of herself, Nora spoke first, saying: "He seems to have told you a good deal."

Mrs. Hallett, feeling she took her life in her hands, said: "Yes. He came to me and told me the—the mess he got himself into at the Loamshires' dance."

Swift as a swallow, Nora turned upon her.

"He did?"

"Yes. He had to tell somebody, poor child! of the muddle he'd made of it!"

There was a pause. Nora sprang up and stood, flushed, with lips parted. Pique, scorn, helpless misery, and intense curiosity struggled for the mastery in her small face. Curiosity won the day. Flushing deeper, she blurted out: "'The muddle'! You mean about his proposing to no end of girls at once?"

"Only three," corrected Mrs. Hallett, quietly. "And only one of those was a real proposal. Yours, Nora, *yours!* He doesn't care twopence for anybody else. The other two were just a hideous mistake."

"A mistake?" the girl took up, quickly. "How can they have been a mistake? D'you mean he says he didn't propose to Miss Goosey, and to the other girl?"

"He doesn't say that," admitted Mrs. Hallett, and felt that she had got to the weak point in her story. "He——"

"How does he explain?" asked Nora, more eagerly than she knew.

Mrs. Hallett bit her lip with vexation. Of course that was just what Billy had not done, and could not do—explain! Then Billy's best friend lifted her head again, looked Billy's one real love in the eyes, and parried: "Have *you* given him a chance to explain?"

This done it was Nora's turn to bite her lip. Of course she had not given Billy Somers any chance to

explain. First, she had run away; then she had cut him dead; she had then flung herself into an engagement with another man; and to-night she had ignored him (Billy) once more. Temper, temper! And—as well as cutting Billy, had she been cutting her own throat as well!

But she replied, defiantly: “He does not deny the facts, Mrs. Hallett! He wrote to Lorne Halliday when she released him, and said he felt a brute. He is still engaged to Miss Goosey. And he has told you about that evening. He can’t say it didn’t happen, can he?”

“I know,” admitted Mrs. Hallett; and then she rose from that bench, and put her two shapely hands on the girl’s shoulders. Very earnestly she went on: “But when all’s said, you are the only one he cares for. You, Nora——”

“No, no——” said Nora, drawing away.

“Yes, yes! You, who won’t give him a look or allow him a word in his own defence. It’s cruel. It’s a waste of love and youth—the best part of life, and the least lasting. Oh, you’ll be sorry some day,” declared the woman with experience, quite passionately. “Don’t, my dear girl, put it off until it’s too late! Won’t you—won’t you see him to-night?”

“But he is to marry Miss Goosey——”

“Oh! Her!” said Mrs. Hallett, regardless of grammar or propriety. “*That’s* nothing really serious. You tell him, Nora——”

But, because she knew she was foolishly melting, Nora hardened herself. She stiffened that erect, little back of hers. "You forget another thing," she said, with dignity: "I am engaged to be married too, you know; to Captain Hunter."

To which Mrs. Hallett made absolutely no reply. No reply that she could have made could have put that engagement of Nora's so scornfully aside. She did not have to say, "Oh! Him!"

Nora backed against the mackintosh, blushing again. She knew what Billy's friend meant. She knew all about it; knew that the engagement was one of pique, knew how little Nora cared for her M.O., knew with what alacrity she would let him go by the board if she and her Billy could be brought together again.

"I see. He hasn't a chance, poor Billy!" put in the wily Mrs. Hallett, contradicting all the girl's thought. "But couldn't you see him even in a *friendly* sort of way? If Lorne can— You know Lorne was actually dancing with him just now before she drove away. And if she can bring herself to do it, couldn't *you*, Nora?"

Another pause. Then, "I don't mind," said Nora, lightly. "I'll speak to him, if you like. I *have* spoken to him, as a matter of fact. I told him I was engaged. I congratulated him, oh, ages ago."

"Yes; I can see it," said Mrs. Hallett, drily.

"Now, come along; be a good girl and speak to him nicely—" she opened the cloakroom door—"just *once*? Come! You can pile your bicycle on to my taxi; and I'll drive you home from this—this exhaustingly festive scene later on. But just come and say 'Good evening' to him now—" Inwardly she was thinking, "If only I can bring them together before that wretched ring scene!"

"Well, it's to please you, you know," said Nora, smiling, as she followed her into the hall. She meant it for a flippant smile. But, curiously enough, she felt already in her sorely tried little heart the stirring of a great relief.

While this interview was going on in the cloakroom between Mrs. Hallett and Nora, the so-much-discussed Billy had finished his glass of champagne and felt a trifle better for it.

He went back into the spinning ballroom to find his *fiancée*. No Lily there. He watched three turns of the gay, whirling kaleidoscope without seeing her, and then set off in quest of her. As you may have gathered from this story the Gooseys' was a large house. He quested all over it for ten minutes or so before he found this radiant daughter of it, and then he beheld her with a man's Burberry slipped on over her silvery-white frock, pattering in with those golden shoes through the conservatory from the garden—the damp, muddy rose garden in

October, at eleven o'clock at night, after dancing herself into a glow, if you please. . . . Still, the girl did not look as if she had taken her death of cold. . . . Perhaps there is a specially sweet little cherub that sits up aloft, preserving from the dangers of cold the woman in love who wants to wear evening dress in a blizzard, or a bathing costume in April, or who has reasons for longing to dally and stroll and saunter when the weather only admits of a brisk walk. Behind Miss Goosey there towered Mr. Orpington, with his "Little Willie" cap pushed to the back of his head, and half of his fair "Little Willie" moustache come ungummed.

With a hurried little smile on her rose-flushed face, Billy's *fiancée* seemed about to sidle past Billy.

He stopped her.

"Here! Aren't you going to give me a dance?" he demanded, looking down at her with a laugh. "What about this one?"

The hard-worked "band" was playing a fox trot.

Mr. Orpington interposed, almost defensively, "Didn't you promise me the next three, Miss Lily?"

But the reckless Billy didn't care whether she had or she hadn't. He didn't mean to have any more shilly-shallying, or to put off the evil hour for another moment.

"I think I shall have to bag the next one," he

said, masterfully, and helped Lily off with her coat—not that it was her coat. “You hold that, Orpington, won’t you?” he said, tossing the young man’s Burberry over to him, and then he took the Lily of the Valley by her dimpled arm, and positively ran her through the conservatory, down a corridor and to the sitting-out place that he had already selected, in his mind’s eye, as the site for getting this job over. The “place” he had selected was a corner of the two big rooms that Mr. Goosey had thrown into one to make a smoking room for “his” officers. Sheltered from view by a tall screen of tawny leather patterned by rich old gilding, there stood an easy chair; squat and open-armed, and with room in it either for Mr. Goosey or for two ordinarily wide men.

Billy patted the broad back in invitation for Lily to take this seat. As her white frills and lemon-yellow curls dropped into its embrace, the girl looked up into the man’s face above her with eyes no longer quite as blankly cloudless as a June sky. No! There was more depth in the blue than there had been, on that rose-scented morning in the Gooseys’ garden when she had greeted her visitor! There was a hint of preoccupation in her look that even young Billy saw; a tiny cloud of “grown-upness.” . . .

“Good Lord,” he thought, drearily enough. “I suppose Mrs. Hallett was right and that the kid

must be fond of me. Curious taste. And she seems to be the only one, anyhow. So, now for it——”

From the depths of the armchair Lily's babyish voice asked him, just a little breathlessly: “Where are you going to sit?”

“Oh, I am going to sit here,” he said, promptly, and sat down on the edge of one of those arms, itself as broad as an ordinary seat, facing that bonnie girl—who was the Wrong Girl all the time.

He began in a businesslike tone. “Now, look here, Lily; I'm afraid I must have seemed an awfully remiss kind of *flancé* to you, and all that kind of thing, but——” He cleared his throat. This reminded him of the old, old days when he was young, and happy, and when he used to go “jockeying about for a start,” as he called it, in his rehearsals for a proposal to Nora. So he brought out with quite an angry rush: “I've got something to show you that I want you to have. That is to say, it's three of 'em, as a matter of fact.”

“Thrèe?” murmured Lily, looking rather dazed.

“Yes,” he almost gabbled, telling himself inwardly that he was within an inch of shirking, and that therefore he *must* burn his boats. “Yes! I want you to pick the one you'd like and hang on to it. Do you mind?” and with this he thrust his hand into his pocket. He drew out and placed on Lily Goosey's rounded and white-clad knee the three little velvet jewellers' cases containing the three

rings that had been burning a hole there all the evening.

"There!" thought the young man with an odd mixture of desperation and relief. "She can choose, and then I'll just stick it on her finger (kiss her, I suppose), and then that will be *that* I've done it now; done it. I can't get out of it. That's the—I mean that settles it!"

He was himself in such an overwrought state that he was not even able to notice the sudden, quite real dismay that spread itself over Lily's pretty face as she gazed down at the three significant-looking little cases.

This question "fixed it" for Lily as well. Up to then it had been "all right" being engaged to Billy Somers, considering that she saw next to nothing of him, and that nearly the whole of her spare time was free for private theatricals—with Mr. Orpington. But now—this brought it home to her that there would be very little more of all that presently. No more rehearsals; no more walks in the rose garden . . . except with Billy, who appeared before her suddenly in the guise of a grim and complete stranger, offering rings.

"Choose, will you?" he repeated, making himself look at her.

Her eyes were two large blue O's, her mouth a third, a pink one. Another "Oh!"—a rather horrified one!—came from it.

A young man once told me that he never knew what a girl meant when she just said "Oh!" (Most young men don't even know that they don't know.) Little did Billy dream what lay beyond that "Oh!" from Lily Goosey's innocent, pink mouth, or that what was costing him so much was certainly costing her a great deal more. For the Lily of the Valley suddenly saw Love, as she conceived it, wrenched from, rather than offered to her to wear with that ring. She saw in front of her a *flancé* who, under guise of giving her something, was taking away all that she was old enough to delight in.

Yes, Mr. Orpington, you'd done it! Those bendings over music scores together, those tryings-on of costumes, those delighted gasps of "Oh, but I have an idea!", those practisings of steps, those rehearsings of gestures, that schooling by some one whom Cochren had said ought to be in opera—this pretty child couldn't imagine any greater bliss in life than going on doing this sort of thing for ever. Yes, all those weeks of preparation for the great Ditch-water revue had ended in something like a very tragical little farce, for the *Pride of the Goosey Beauty Chorus*!

And you, poor Billy, with all your boyish worry over treating this little girl so badly if you didn't come up to the scratch—couldn't you see that some one else was now filling the bill as you could never, never do? Couldn't you read the conscience-stricken

misery in her eyes as she fingered the first little box—or see it give place to unspeakable relief at the interruption that came before she could speak?

For it was then that Mrs. Hallett came up—with Nora (Nora again!) a pace behind her; Mrs. Hallett, with some wild suggestion that he—Billy—should see Miss Wynne-Pritchard home.

“Oh, yes, *do*,” breathed Lily, as Billy sprang to his feet.

Billy and Nora found themselves all of a sudden exchanging a glance; the first direct and friendly glance for long, long ages of estrangement and bitterness. . . . Everything in that ornate room seemed suddenly to drop away from them. Mrs. Hallett and the golden-haired girl on the arm of whose chair Billy had been sitting, the rings, everything. . . . Nothing was left but that look, warm as a caress, of his eyes into hers . . . for a second only.

Following on the heels of that magic second came that which set Mr. Goosey’s house in an uproar, boiling up like milk—khaki milk. . . .

Tumult and excitement outside the door; then in they came flooding, all the young officers, fastening their belts, calling aloud: “I say Mr. Somers . . . where is Mr. Somers? . . . Push off quickly. . . . The Commandant’s just rung up. . . . Night ’Ops! . . . He’s giving us ten minutes to start the cars and get down to Camp!”

CHAPTER XXI

IN ten minutes the tail lights of the last khaki-laden car had disappeared down the avenue between the very new shrubs.

Bewildered at the suddenness of it, only women were left clustered together in the hall; the younger Gooseys and their mamma quite ready to believe that the Germans had landed already. Mrs. Milbanke, with nobody left to attend to her, remembered her husband and began to hope the car would not be late in the morning.

Mrs. Hallett, however, hadn't yet finished her work.

In the sitting-out room her quick eyes had seen what her quick senses had already foretold—Lily Goosey's dismay when Billy placed those three little boxes on her knee for her to choose her ring.

But her quick brain was quite ready for the situation. She came up to Nora again.

"Help me to explain to all these people that a night alarm is only a training exercise," she murmured. "Those boys are only going to flounder about the hedges for an hour or two, and then turn in," she went on at large, and then she took the eldest Miss Goosey firmly by the arm, saying that her dress

was torn and might she borrow pins to hold it together while she drove home.

In Lily's pretty blue-and-white room she turned to look at the child. Lily was actually pale, tremulous. Who would have thought she was a newly engaged girl, just come from choosing her ring?

Apparently busy with that mythical tear in her skirt, Mrs. Hallett said, kindly: "I'm dreadfully sorry I interrupted you just now, my dear, when you were with Mr. Somers. I did just see what he was doing. 'The' ring, wasn't it? How he will hate me, having to put it off until to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" echoed Lily, and looked really alarmed. "Do you think he'll really come again to-morrow?"

"But, of course!" said Mrs. Hallett, comfortingly. "I knew he was bringing the rings to-night, you know. I'm sure you won't mind his having told me. I'm a very old friend of his, you know. I hope we shall be friends, too, you and I."

To this invitation the soft-hearted Lily fell at once. Her heart was very full; now her agitation brimmed over.

"Oh, Mrs. Hallett," she cried, suddenly flopping down on the bed. "D'you know, I'm in such trouble . . . I must tell somebody or I shall really burst! I—I—" Enormous tears welled up as she went on. "If you're such a friend of his, perhaps you're the one who could tell him—ask him—oh, Mrs. Hallett!

Do you think it would break his heart very much if he knew that I—I'd changed my mind?"

Mingled with her sense of the humour of this, there was a sweet warmth at Mrs. Hallett's heart over the simple and transparent child. Billy break his heart? Over Lily?

Very kindly she patted that rounded knee on which the three rings had been laid.

"Don't distress yourself, my dear Miss Goosey!" (Lily sobbed without restraint.)

"No, don't! These things do happen," said Mrs. Hallett, "and young men's hearts do mend again, somehow!"

But Lily only sobbed, more violently: "Oh, but I feel I've been so wicked," she gulped. "Of course—he—the other one—Buff (I mean Mr. Orpington) did know from the very beginning that I was an engaged girl and all that. But we *couldn't* help being always together, when he was so good about the theatricals, and after all it was to help the Dean! And then afterwards I did tell him he oughtn't to say such things to me (no, not the Dean, Mr. Orpington) because it was wrong, and I'd given my word to somebody else! And he said he didn't care who I'd given my word to, he was going to ask me for myself, and he did again to-night in the garden, Mrs. Hallett, and of course I—I *oughtn't* to have let him hold my hand like that——"

"Nor kiss you," suggested Mrs. Hallett, gravely.

"No. How did you know? B-but I didn't really *let* him. He just *did*, very often and m-much—" From her sobs the child might have been confessing bigamy, but the wife of the late Adjutant remained demure.

"But tell me," she said, smoothing down the pinned skirt, "you really *care* for this Mr. Orpington, Lily?"

"*Yes!*" The word jumped from Lily's quivering lips as if in capital letters.

"And not for Mr. Somers?"

"*No!* I'm very sorry, and I know there's no accounting for tastes, as ma says, and of course Mr. Somers is much nicer looking I daresay, only *I* don't think so! I can't help it!"

"Don't try, my dear. It goes by favour; always did, and always will. Thank Heaven!"

"Yes, but what about Mr. Somers!" wept the faithless *fiancée*. "Pa will think it's awful, he's so fond of him, and ma was so pleased because his people were all in the County families of wherever-it-was, and Buff, that's Mr. Orpington, well, I don't suppose his were anybody at all, and I *do* not care twopence! Only about sp-posing Mr. Somers' life, that's the only thing I mind! I'd do *anything*—except go on marrying him, and I shall simply have to tell him that. *Oh!* Mrs. Hallett, *what* am I to say to him?"

Mrs. Hallett thought Lily had better repeat all she had just said to her. At this Lily was shocked into some semblance of calm.

"Oh, but that wouldn't be at all the thing," she said, blowing her pink nose. "Oh no, I should have to put it nicely, you know. I shall have to send back these—" She stretched out the three little jewellers' cases that she was still mechanically clutching—"with a little note. But what to put in it? I don't know; it's almost more difficult than still being engaged to him——"

Mrs. Hallett shook her head almost as if alarmed. "Don't say that, my dear," she said. "Is this a pencil on your dressing-table? Now, have you a bit of paper? Anything will do—here, this——"

And it was on the back of her revue programme that Mrs. Hallett (secretly "turning mental hand-springs," as she afterwards put it in a letter to her Jim) drafted the following note:

"MY DEAR MR. SOMERS:—

"I do not know what you will think of me for what I am going to say to you, but I am sending back all three of these rings which you asked me to choose from; when I consented to become engaged to you, I was mistaken in my feelings——"

"Yes! That's so true!" sighed Lily over her shoulder.

—“*and I have now discovered my mistake. The whole truth is that I care for somebody else. Please try to forgive me [wrote Mrs. Hallett] for any pain that this may cause you——*”

“I do hope he will, but I don’t see how he can!” sighed Lily again.

—“*and let me hope that some day, when you have forgotten it, you will allow me to be*

“*Your sincere friend,*

“*LILY GOOSEY.*”

“I should never have thought of that. I think it’s beautiful, dear Mrs. Hallett. You are an angel!” breathed the girl, fervently. The benign if hypocritical Mrs. Hallett kissed her tear-stained peach of a face, and left Miss Goosey to copy out this masterpiece in her own schoolgirl handwriting on her own Saxe-blue note paper. Billy would get it to-morrow. . . .

Billy’s friend sighed with relief almost as deep as his own would be.

“All the same, if I were a man I believe she would be the one of the three I’d marry myself,” reflected Mrs. Hallett. “People scoff at the ‘beautiful fool,’ but doesn’t it mean two of God’s best gifts to women wrapped up in one girl?” (You see she was feeling tired.)

Having sent on Miss Wynne-Pritchard, with her bicycle stacked on to the taxi, the Adjutant's wife got back to her room at the Sportsman, and had scarcely finished her cigarette before she was sleeping the sleep of the—let us say generous.

To Nora in the cab she had merely murmured drowsily that she was too honourable to bet her ten to one in nonstop silk stockings that Billy's engagement would be "off" during the next forty-eight hours. She (Mrs. Hallett) didn't intend to have any further talk with any of her young friends that night.

For one thing, she considered that they had exhausted her sufficiently for the present, and for another she felt convinced that things were presently going to disentangle themselves for the best.

Nora's engagement to the hairy-hoofed Hunter was the worst crab at present—but, somehow, that would come right, as right as anything ever comes that ought never to have been there.

It was plain enough how it happened; Nora's acceptance of Captain Hunter had only been the measure of her love for Billy turned upside down. With that measure only half full, Nora might have kept it balanced, but it had been so brimful that it had toppled over of itself with all its treasure.

It must right itself.

It was to right itself in a very few hours, in a way that even Mrs. Hallett did not guess.

CHAPTER XXII

AT lunch-time on the following day, there drove up to Mr. Goosey's door Mr. Goosey's most powerful covered car with a very angry young woman inside it.

This was Mrs. James Milbanke, otherwise Miss Nellie Hunter, returning in ample time for the second performance of that highly successful amateur revue, "By Numbers."

She was also returning with the hope of getting even, in some way, with her brother. With the smile on her face with which she was preparing to greet her hosts she was thinking inwardly: "Oh, so *that* was your game, was it, Rex? Wanted to pay me out because I left your precious Wynne-Pritchards? So you wrote to James that I wanted looking after, and got me fetched back? Right-o! . . . You didn't think I was quite capable of wrangling old James, and stepping straight into the car again and come back, did you? . . . Now, you wait and see whether I don't get a bit of my own back!"

But it was with the clearest brow in the world that Rex's sister alighted at the Gooseys' door again, kissed Mrs. Goosey and all the available Goslings, explained that her husband had only a slight cold,

and that he positively insisted upon her coming back for the second performance of the show.

"I suppose everything's just as we left it, isn't it, Lily?" she said. "Nothing wanted for to-night?"

Lily, looking as if she had slept badly, and as if something weighed upon her that she did not feel sufficiently grown-up to tackle, told her that Mr. Orpington had said they were running out of spirit gum and had better have another bottle.

Mrs. Milbanke volunteered to fetch it, saying that she would quite enjoy a walk down into Ditchwater by herself, to blow the cobwebs away. Inwardly she welcomed this as an excuse to look in at her brother's quarters; she wanted, if possible, to make it hot for Rex without delay.

In the usual little bit of crowded street where one met everybody one knew in Ditchwater, she met Nora Wynne-Pritchard, who also looked as if she had not slept much that last night.

She greeted her with effusion. Nora looked dully surprised. "Hullo!" she said; "I thought you went off at eight o'clock this morning."

"So I did, and came back right away. My hubby was quite all right, after all; sent me back! Glad to get rid of me, I do believe! Now, I'm going to see if I can raise a cup of tea with Rex, at his quarters. You come along with me, Nora, won't you? Yes, do, there's a dear!"

This was a spiteful impulse of Mrs. Milbanke's. What she was going to say to Rex she didn't know; she meant to make it thoroughly unpleasant for him, and to have his *flancée* there at the same time would add considerably to the unpleasantness.

"All right; I'll come," said Nora, dispiritedly.

It was quite true that she hadn't slept much the night before. How could she, after that talk with Mrs. Hallett? After that unforgettable moment when she had met Billy's eyes again? Nothing, if she came to think of it, had really happened. Yet so much seemed to have happened. Her troubled mind seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for something further to happen. . . . She hadn't decided what to do, or whether she were really going to do anything after all. . . .

Still, she knew that if she went, chaperoned by his sister, to tea with Rex at his quarters, it would stave off Rex from coming up to tea at the White House. It would also stave off the *tête-à-tête* afterwards.

It was five minutes' walk to the M.O.'s new office-cum-dispensing room, which was not now in the barracks, but two rooms of a cottage taken by the Quartering Committee, a stone's throw away from the barracks.

They found only an R.A.M.C. corporal in charge.

The corporal told them that Captain Hunter had only just stepped across to the parade ground and

would be back in a couple of minutes; in fact his cup of tea was just ready; wouldn't the ladies have a cup of tea also?

"I thought he expected you to tea, Nellie?" put in Nora, a little surprised.

"Oh, that's all right; I'm Captain Hunter's sister," said Mrs. Milbanke to the corporal.

"Yes, Miss. I seen your performance last night, Miss," said the man.

"We'll go inside and wait for him, Corporal," said Nellie, leading the way into the inner room.

Nora, still half living in her world of last night, glanced aimlessly round this office.

The M.O.'s sanctum was scantily furnished with a deal table with drawers, two chairs, one or two medical cabinets, and with workshop-made shelves running round three of the walls. On these shelves stood a few books and a row of glass-stoppered bottles, large and small. Files hung from nails and the place was warmed by a stove with an enamelled bowl on it.

"He's coming across the parade now," said Nellie, and at that moment the orderly came in with (a man's idea of) cups of tea; two of them clutched in one large hand, with lumps of sugar in the saucers, sodden and brown where the tea had slopped over. As the man put them down on the table and turned to get biscuits out of a tin, the M.O. himself entered,

giving a little start as he beheld his unexpected visitors.

He smiled, tenderly, as he greeted Nora; then addressed his sister—not tenderly.

“Thought you were off home?” (curtly).

“Oh, James’ wire was all a mistake, dear, so I was able to come back again at once, by good luck,” explained Mrs. Milbanke, blandly, and for the third time that afternoon. “James was perfectly O.K.—thank you so much for being so *anxious*!” (Here there was a flash as the two pairs of black eyes crossed each other like swords. There is no foe like a sister!) “We ordered tea, you see.”

Captain Hunter turned to his *fiancée*. “Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?” he murmured, reproachfully. “I could have got a nice tea for you then.”

“Oh, but this *is* nice, Rex,” protested Nora, more gently than she had spoken to him, just because never before had she felt so self-reproachful about this man. She had wronged him in getting engaged to him; she had treated him cavalierly throughout the whole of their engagement; now she was again speculating and mooning about that other man, not half such a good sort as Rex! Rex, who was so devoted to her, who had always been so straight about his devotion! She nibbled one of his biscuits and wished ruefully that she could have given poor Rex any devotion in return. She did not realise it was Billy

who had softened her. At all events she might show a little interest in Rex's affairs for once.

"So this is where you doctor your sick men, is it? Do tell us," she went on, nervously, as the young man perched himself on the table close beside her. "Tell us what all those funny bottles are for and everything——"

"I'll show you all round if you're interested," he said, his face lighting up. "Not that there is very much." And, beginning with his horribly beautiful cases of little knives, he began to show her most of the things in the room, talking as he did so, and studiously avoiding any notice of his sister; who sipped her tea, nonchalantly, and waited for an opening to say something really nasty to him.

"But aren't you letting your own tea get cold?" said Nora. "It is so funny, the way men will sit for hours just *looking* at things to drink."

"I always like them cool," said the M.O., casually. "Hate drinks hot. You girls all seem able to swallow things boiling, I've noticed."

"Yes, and yet you'd think the men's mouths must be more hardened than ours," put in Nellie Milbanke, "what with pipe tobacco, and the whiskey, and the ly—the smoking room stories, I mean."

Her brother ignored her; going on talking to his *fiancée*, and interspersing with tender glances the matter-of-fact things he was saying. "Well, those are all the instruments for pulling Tommy about.

I don't do any dental work, of course. And we've no X-rays in a small place like this, naturally. Those are up at the Cottage Hospital——”

He was wondering how soon he could get the girl to himself; for once in her life the little thing was in a sweet mood. The little thing, acutely uncomfortable under his looks, was wondering how soon she could go.

He went on: “All those files are full of medical history sheets and other not very interesting things—I say, darling” (*sotto voce*), “I wish I could *talk* to you. I'll walk up with you, presently, and we'll drop Nellie.” Then louder: “Those? Those are just the ordinary nasty things to take; quinine, calomel and so on. And this——”

He stopped as he picked up another little bottle and put it aside.

“What's in that?” asked Nora Wynne-Pritchard, looking up, quickly; interested for the first time, of course, because it did not seem as if he meant to tell her anything about that particular little blue, glass-stoppered bottle.

“That? Oh, that's just for an experiment of my own.” He checked a smile.

“Is it poison?”

“Poison? Oh, no. . . . Not unless you take it in gallons; which isn't necessary. It's—well something between laudanum and laughing gas, say.”

“What's it called?”

"Oh, one of those weird West African names that you couldn't pronounce. My father brought the original formula back after one of his voyages. Queer stuff," said the M.O., now smiling again as he thought to himself of the effect of that very drug on a certain young friend of his not so long ago. "I shouldn't care for anybody to try it on me. We'll put it at the back of the shelf as one puts things out of the way of the children. . . . Come and look at these things instead, Nora; rather more interesting"—here he slipped in a "*sweetheart!*" *sotto voce* and a little touch on her arm. "These are skiagraphs; X-ray photographs, you know. Look——"

Standing at the further end of the little room, he took a portfolio from another shelf and spread out the photographs on a fan for Nora to see; his dark head bent down as close as possible to her wild-rose face. He made no attempt to show the skiagraph to his sister.

Now, apparently young Mrs. Milbanke was not interested in X-ray photographs. But, equally apparently, she was deeply interested in something else. Her eyes had gone at once to where that little blue, glass-stoppered bottle, which Rex had smiled over, had been moved for safety to the back of the shelf. Then her vindictive, black eyes had wandered to her brother's back again. Twice this had happened.

Her brother's low-pitched voice went on in murmurs: "Look at this one, now—a complete ankle-bone of silver, and this—my Nora, you are looking very lovely to-day! . . . Then there's this. . . . You do care for me a little bit at last, I believe? . . . Yes, well, this man is as sound as ever. Really an extraordinarily successful bit of work!"

This sentence might have applied to what his sister did next. With one quick, noiseless gesture she had reached for that mysterious bottle, had muffled with her glove the tiny click as the stopper was removed, and, strolling casually across the room as if to glance out of the window again, and emptied half the contents of that phial of "queer stuff" into the third of those cups of tea on the table. . . . No! There's no foe like a sister whose angry passion for revenge has been aroused by a brother with anything to hide!

The next moment, moving across the room with a cup of tea in each hand, Nellie Milbanke broke with her gayest tone upon the murmurings of the M.O.

"Oh, I say, you two, do hurry up and finish making love to each other over those old photographs; you'll have heaps of time later on," she said with her little theatrical laugh. "I want to be off to rest before the show; come on! Do drink up your teas——"

They turned; Nora, flushing with angry embarrassment, took her half-empty cup and held it. The M.O., scowling, drank off his cooled tea at a draught.

Two minutes later any one looking into that little dispensary might have recognised the familiar face and figure of the Medical Officer whom all Ditchwater knew; and might not have found anything unusual in his appearance and manner. His darkly handsome face was not flushed; his low-pitched speech was not slurred; he moved about the room with perfect control. He was speaking to his visitors and calling them correctly by their names. It was only what he was speaking about that was so extraordinary!

"Now, you've seen all I've got in the place, Nora; little blue bottle and all; but the real joke you haven't heard yet," he began quite suddenly. "You remember that bottle of stuff that I was telling you about a minute ago?" He jerked his dark head to where he supposed it to be still standing on the shelf. "Talk about the Devil in solution! Well, that's just about *that!*" he declared with a laugh. "Jove, it was a success!"

The girls stared at him; Nora arrested, his sister beginning to feel a little frightened already at the effect of what she had done. What *had* she done? What would Rex say or do next?

He went on, gaily. "The fact is I only tried it once, but that was a great rag. . . . Young What's-his-name at that dance! You know! Young Somers!"

"What?" exclaimed Nora, sharply.

"Yes; young Billy Somers, that cub who's Ad-

jutant now." He broke off to laugh triumphantly again. "The limit," he chuckled. He went on laughing. "I suppose it takes different chaps differently, but the way it took him— Well, you knew that, Nora, didn't you?" He turned to the girl. "Yes! It was you yourself who first let me in to that, of course, wasn't it?"

Nora, standing there tense, interдите, broke in.

"What do you mean?" Now her voice was certainly altered. "What do you mean? I knew *what* about . . . Mr. Somers? I let you into *what*? What *do* you mean?"

"Why!" he laughed; "about young Somers and all these girls he went and proposed to at the dance. You told me! That is you told me about two of 'em, the day we were engaged ourselves. Miss Goosey and Miss Halliday. How am I to know who else there were? I did try to keep my eye on that fellow at the dance, but I never managed to catch him out, I tried to follow him about, but I'd no luck. Still, you know what he's been up to—and now you know how it was!"

Through his laughter Nora's voice broke as sharp as an icicle. "'How it was,'" she repeated, and at her tone Nellie Milbanke, who had been half nervously watching her brother, turned quickly to observe this girl with the controlled face and the blazing eyes. "'How it was'? Well, how was it?"

Please explain. Please tell me at once," her hands were clenched by her skirt, "what you mean."

"My dear little girl, aren't I telling you?" took up Captain Hunter, evidently so pleased with his own joke on young Somers that he did not recognise what was meant by Nora's tense pose, her voice.

Wide-eyed, she listened while he (this man whom she had believed so "straight" in his devotion!) went on to undo all the fell work that he himself had done that night of the Loamshires' dance, and to give himself away as no explanation from any one source could ever have begun to do.

"This youngster probably doesn't know to this day why he made such a fool of himself, but I do," exulted the drugged Hunter. "It was no more than six drops of that dope in his bubbly and the trick was done! And I——"

"Rex, you fool! Shut up!" broke in his sister, sharply; too late. "You don't know what you're talking about——"

"Oh, don't I? I bet you half the match-making mammas in the country would like to know where to lay their hands on a dose of that stuff. *He* didn't know what he was talking about, young Somers didn't, after he'd had that one drink with me," wound up the M.O., triumphantly. "Six drops in his glass! Dropped 'em in myself, in one second when he wasn't looking. Smart, wasn't it? That did it!"

Ten minutes later the Medical Officer, alone in his office, glanced at his watch.

"Half-past five," he muttered, passing his hand over his coal-black head, which felt oddly tired and stupid. "And I haven't seen Nora to-day."

But neither that nor any other day was he to be allowed to see Nora Wynne-Pritchard again. The West African dope that had got Nora's one love into such trouble had been the very means of pulling him out of that trouble at last.

CHAPTER XXIII

MOST love stories end with a proposal. The love story of Mr. Billy Somers, on the other hand, had begun with one (or with three, whichever way you look at it). So that he had his own views on the function.

Which was the reason why, some time after what happened in our last chapter, he went up to the White House and was shown by the smiling Mary into the drawing room where Nora awaited him alone. Her father had gone up to the War Office (again). Her mother was writing letters in the dining room, the dear. You see, the "official" explanation to the Wynne-Pritchards had been gone through days ago, partly by Billy, partly by Nora herself. . . . All the talking over (useless to pretend there hadn't been plenty of that, and of "what did I tell you's" and "I always said so's." The Wynne-Pritchards were not a model family, but of the usual human race).

Now all was peace in that pretty chintz drawing room, where the English firelight flickered on the Indian brass that had seen the Major and his wife through their service; it flickered on a little, shining almond-eyed idol that had always been packed up the first thing as they moved from station to station;

the understanding being that their home was wherever that little Indian god was set up.

Nora was sitting on the tiger-skin rug when Billy was announced. He dropped into a low chair close beside her, kissed her several times, and then informed her that their marriage would take place in a week's time, allowing them a week's honeymoon before Billy Somers went out to France.

"Our *marriage*, did you say?" returned Miss Wynne-Pritchard, mildly—that is, as mildly as she ever could say anything. "Am I not to be asked anything about that?"

"No fear," said Billy. "That would mean proposing to you again. And, Nora, I simply bar proposals. Had some, thanks."

"I seem to remember," said Nora, turning to smile at him with those traditional, grey-blue, black-fringed eyes that are sufficient compensation by Providence for any injustice to Ireland. They always had the effect of making Billy forget what he was saying, as he told her.

Presently he began again: "Well, I paid my duty call on—er—my *fiancée*, Mrs. Orpington. We talked about proposals—oh, yes! I don't mind what I say to the Lily, now. Some people you only can be real friends with after it's quite clear that you're never going to marry them yourself. She said that real, cut-and-dried proposals seemed to be going out now; she didn't think they were a bit the same as

when ma was a girl. Said that when two people understood each other they just . . . understood; like herself and Buff. They seem frightfully happy and all that."

"They looked it, at the great war wedding," said Nora, "but I heard everybody warning him not to carry off one of the bridesmaids by mistake; the whole flock of Goslings looked all exactly alike and all exactly the same age to me, in church! He said he'd put them all on their honour that none of them should wear orange blossoms but his particular one, that day."

"A very decent chap, 'Buff' Orpington," said Billy, warmly, as a man can afford to speak of the husband of a girl he never was in love with. "But why all this talk of Orps? What about ourselves?"

"Well, what?"

"If Orpington can do it I can."

"I seem to have nothing to say here, Billy."

"You may say 'Yes' just for form's sake."

"Then, for form's sake—" but she did not even get out the "yes" before Billy shot a long arm about her rose-white throat, bent his smooth primrose-coloured head above her dusky one, and smothered the word in a kiss as long as a dozen.

"Don't put your hair straight. I love it like that," he said, presently. "Besides, waste of time when—we might be talking. Do it when I've gone; and write to Mrs. Hallett then, too, will you, darling? She

was the fairy godmother who worked for *me*. You might tell her a bit of Ditchwater news to amuse Jim with in hospital; tell them Hunter's exchanged——"

A cloud passed over Nora's face. "Don't let's talk of him, dear."

"Right; he seems to have talked enough of himself, by Jove!" commented Billy,—and checked himself from further comment on what he called the poisonous family. "Tell her about Pa Goosey and what a tremendous success he made of his contract. Tophole huts, and streets inside anybody else's price. Glad I'm not staying on to live in 'em, though."

Nora's voice shook a little. "Are you so keen to go?"

"Of course."

"And to leave me?"

He looked at her.

. . . Then, as if the remembrance of France had put into her mind some one who was busily working there now, Nora told her lover, "I had the sweetest letter, this morning, from Lorne Halliday."

"Oh, had you?" said Billy, and looked away. The thought of Lorne Halliday's face (though he had done nothing, wittingly, to stamp that wistful look upon it) humbled him and would always humble him. "You wrote to her?"

"Yes."

"Did you——"

He stopped, not knowing how to put it.

Nora, looking up from the rug where she was leaning comfortably against his knee, helped him out. "You mean did I explain to her about what happened at that dreadful dance, and about what Captain Hunter had done?"

"Yes; I did mean that. Did you?"

Nora said, slowly: "Billy, I thought it well over, whether I should or not. At first I thought she ought to know that—that you simply didn't know when you were proposing to her."

"Yes. Of course," agreed the simple Billy.

The girl so near him went on: "But I thought again. You know she cared, dear."

"Oh, I don't think so," protested Billy, flushing with discomfort.

(For the burnt offering of a love that asked for nothing in return is prized by our sex as something far above rubies; it is also considerably less often met with than the gems of the purest ray serene. By us so appreciated, by them it is regarded as a worry worse than many Mess bills.)

Nora persisted, softly: "Lorne cared. And she thought that for just a little minute you must have cared too. I—I shouldn't want to take that little minute from her, boy dearest."

There was a pause. Billy Somers muttered something about: "Well, I suppose a woman knows best what another woman would wish; blowed if I

do . . .” Then he cleared his throat and said in a matter-of-fact tone: “So she’s not to know. All right. How many people do know?” Nora counted on her little fingers, beginning with the one girdled by Billy’s emeralds. “Those two Hunters. You. Me. Father. Mother. Mrs. Hallett (and her husband, I suppose). ‘A few, that is eight.’ You never told Lily Goosey; are you going to?”

“No,” said Billy, and he twinkled. “The little thing rather enjoys thinking she behaved like a perfect scoundrel to the man she was engaged to and chucked him for the man she wanted. Pity to spoil that for her, I think. *Nobody* else need know what happened.”

“No.”

“And presently we shall have forgotten about it ourselves—all except *our* part, Nora——”

The girl had one of her mutinous flashes: “Oh, *shall* we? I don’t think I shall ever forget how perfectly *awful* you made me feel!”

“I made *you* feel?” retorted the boy in not unnatural surprise. “But when it was you who behaved like a perfect little Hun to me! Cutting me, treating me like a dog——”

“I *mean* that,” explained Nora. “That’s what I mean. I don’t know *when* I shall be able to forgive you for what I did!”

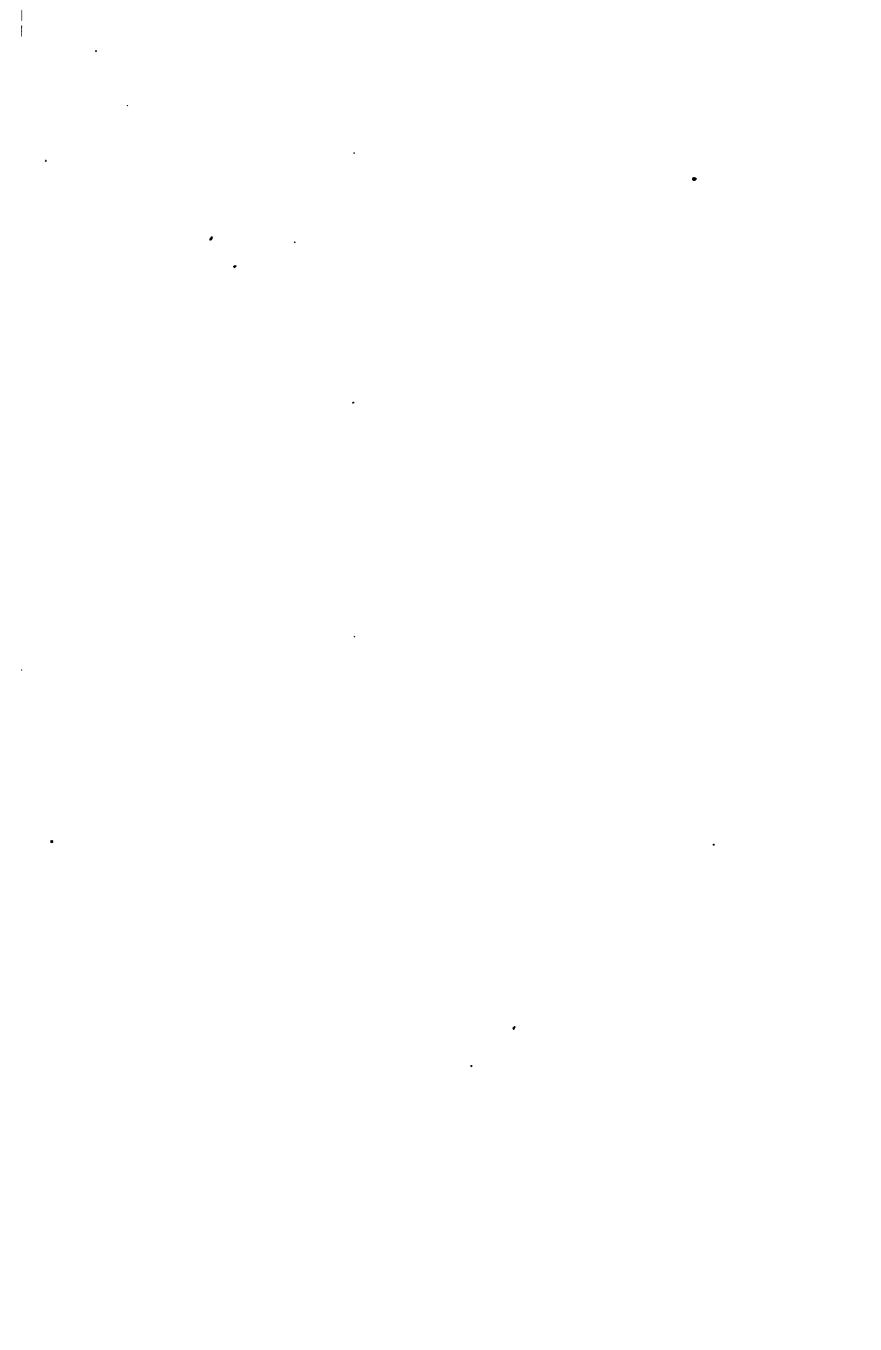
He laughed. He was just beginning—not to understand her, for where love is, there understand-

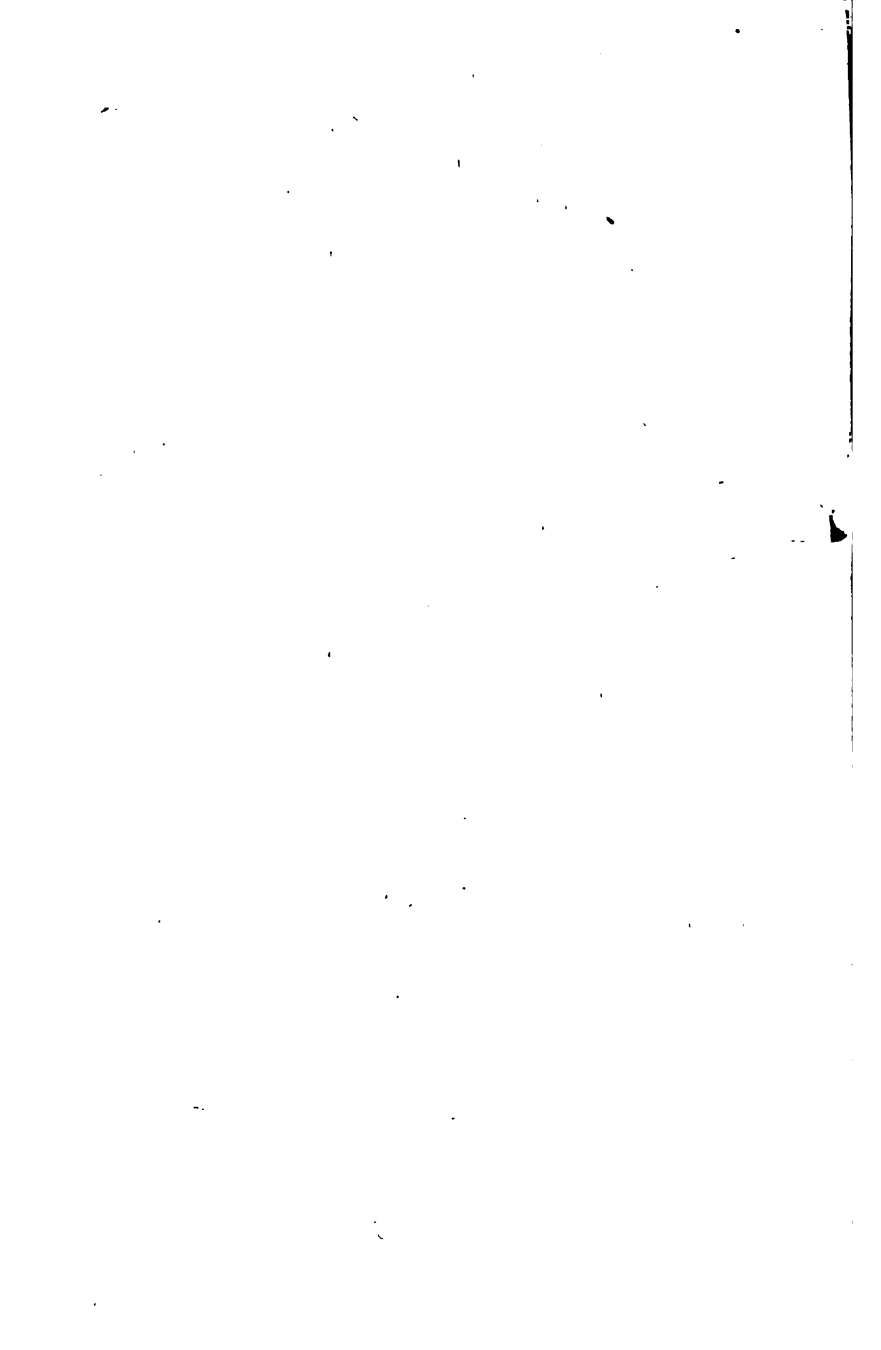
ing is superfluous—but to get accustomed to her little ways, just as her father was accustomed to the little, unreasonable, absurd, and charming ways of her Irish mother.

“Try to forgive,” he whispered, bending forward. “Begin now. If we both had a rotten time, it makes all this seem so much more ripping, now. Doesn’t it?”

As he drew the dark head backwards again, it was in perfect trust and happiness that she smiled up at her boy—all hers now.

And there smiled down upon the pair of them that little, brazen, almond-eyed Indian god who had seen Nora’s father and mother through their long service, and who, wherever he was set up, determined for them that here was Home.





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